

# Honors College hosts Leader Dogs for the Blind; new student org launched



Melissa Weisse, chief philanthropy officer for Leader Dogs for the Blind, speaks about the organization's mission to empower blind and visually impaired individuals by pairing them with guide dogs and other supportive services.

 October 11, 2019

---

SHARE THIS STORY

On October 10, The Honors College hosted an event in collaboration with Future Leader Dogs at Oakland University and Rochester Hills-based Leader Dogs for the Blind.

Attendees learned about how leader dogs help blind and visually-impaired individuals navigate daily life. Guest speakers from Leader Dogs for the Blind, Chief Philanthropy Officer Melissa Weisse and Leader Dog Trainers Ashley Nunnally and Heidi Vollrath, spoke about the organization's mission to ensure that people who are differently abled have access to the resources and services they need to lead full and productive lives.

According to the organization's website, [leaderdog.org](http://leaderdog.org), 1.3 million people are legally blind in the U.S. and 75,000 people become blind or visually impaired each year. Everyday tasks such as getting to work, visiting family, connecting with friends and running errands can be a tremendous challenge. Leader dogs are specially trained to help individuals accomplish these tasks and have been credited with changing the lives of those they serve.

Jeff Hawkins spoke to audience members about how his leader dog, Gracie, helped restore his confidence and independence after he lost his vision. A former paramedic, Hawkins said he struggled with his vision loss for years before contacting Leader Dogs for the Blind in 2011 and receiving his guide dog the following year. Now, he's able to pursue his hobbies, which include wilderness backpacking, and snow- and waterskiing.

The event also marked the official launch of Future Leader Dogs at Oakland University, a student organization that is partnering with Leader Dogs for the Blind. The student group plans to select students to raise puppies on campus for one year. The dogs will then return to Leader Dogs for the Blind and train as guide dogs for the blind and visually impaired.

Learn more about Future Leader Dogs at OU  
at [oaklandu.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/na](http://oaklandu.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/na)