

# lifestyle

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## FUNDRAISING EFFORT

## Blind man to swim Strait of Georgia for guide dogs

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**A North Shore man is set to swim across the Strait of Georgia to help the organization that helps him walk across the street.**

Scott Rees, who is blind, is hoping to raise awareness and funds for Canadian Guide Dogs for the Blind. The non-profit organization provided Rees with Kaleb, his beloved yellow lab, opening up a world of mobility for him.

"I've always thought it would be nice at some point to do something to try to give back a little bit and this year, I decided this was my chance to do it. I'm not going to find this swim is going get any easier as I get older," he said. "No time like the present."

Rees, 39, was diagnosed at young age with retinitis pigmentosa, a recessive genetic condition that causes his eyes' rod and cone cells to progressively die off over time.

As an athletic youth with not-so-great vision, he gravitated towards competitive swimming and outdoor adventure sports. When his eyesight's deterioration became more rapid in his 20s, Rees had to learn to use a cane to navigate.

Today, Rees can only see bright light but with Kaleb at his side, he can board the bus to get downtown where Rees works as a civil engineer, make his way to the gym or pool, or meet friends for lunch.

"Doing the things that you don't really think about before you can't do them," he said.

"It's not even really comparable in terms of mobility. When you have a guide dog,



North Vancouver's Scott Rees, who is blind, plans to swim across the Strait of Georgia to raise money for the non-profit group that gave him his guide dog Kaleb. PAUL MCGRATH / NSN

you cruise."

Rees describes Kaleb as an idyllic walking partner and friend.

"He's definitely a lab. Instantly, you bond with a dog like that. He's friendly and playful when he's not working," he said. "Our relationship has been great. He's also a really, really great family dog. My wife absolutely adores him and (so does) my son."

There are several non-profits that train and place guide dogs in Canada but the wait to get one can sometimes be measured in years, which is a long time to live feeling stranded, Rees said.

Training the pups isn't cheap so Rees is hoping his effort will rally people to donate, making it easier and faster for the non-profits to get dogs like Kaleb at the side of a

grateful, blind master.

"I'm just trying to help. I just felt like they've given me a lot and this is my little way of trying to give back to them and also to help other Canadians that are in need of these dogs," he said.

### Swim the strait

Rees is aiming to enter the water off Davis Bay in Sechelt early in the morning on July 22, when the weather is most likely to be calm, and swim 30 kilometres to Piper's Lagoon Park in Nanaimo – about the same distance as the English Channel.

While Rees is in the strait, Kaleb won't be doggy paddling along to be his guide. Unlike most water-loving labs, Kaleb seems to prefer sitting on the beach (and who likes the smell of wet dog?). Instead, a friend of Rees will be following in a nearby boat to keep on course using a radio with a bone conduction headset, and provide him with water, sport nutrition packs, and Vaseline for his wetsuit.

The thought of the crossing is a bit daunting for Rees, who trains regularly, but because of his work commitments and role as a father raising an infant and a toddler, he never gets to spend more than two hours in the pool at a time.

If all goes well and the waters are calm, he hopes to make the crossing in 10 hours (although he's prepared to see it stretch to 12 or 13 if he has to battle through swells).

"It is a big undertaking," he said. "It's a little bit nerve wracking just not wanting to mess it up on race day, but I'm pretty determined."

To donate to Rees' fundraising campaign, visit [swimthestrail.ca](http://swimthestrail.ca).



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