

Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Theresa Stern and I'm your host.

Welcome everyone to Central Bark. Today I am super excited to introduce you to outdoor enthusiast and Guide Dogs for the Blind graduate, Mary Wilson and her guide dog, Thor. Hey Mary.

Mary Wilson: Hi Theresa.

Theresa Stern: So Mary, tell us a little bit about your journey to getting your first guide dog. I know Thor isn't your first guide dog, but just a little bit about your relationships with Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Mary Wilson: Sure. So I grew up fully sighted, drove a car and all that good stuff. And then in my late twenties and early thirties, I started having vision loss. And at first I was what I'd call a vision light. And then things progressed to really low vision and then the journey took me a little further down the road toward blindness. And I've always really loved the outdoors and I knew for me, as great of a tool as the white cane is, that wasn't something that was going to work for me full-time for the rest of my life. I was fortunate to know some friends with guide dogs from Guide Dogs for the Blind. As soon as I got the white cane skills down, I went ahead and applied, and it was just one of the best decisions I ever made.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness. What was it like for you? Your first... And I can't remember the name of your first guide dog.

Mary Wilson: My first dog was Frank.

Theresa Stern: Frank. That's right. I knew it was something adorable like that. I couldn't remember.

Mary Wilson: It was absolutely amazing. As soon as I first picked up that harness and we went down that sidewalk, I just couldn't believe the speed and the grace and the efficiency. And I was just stunned because I felt like I was able to walk as fast as I did when I was sighted and I never really thought I'd get that back. So I was thrilled to be able to be matched with a dog that had that risk [inaudible 00:02:13]. Frank was just such an absolute delight and he really helped me get back outside. It was him I first started doing day hikes with and stuff like that. He's now retired so he might be glad that he's able to enjoy retirement rather than having me continue to do all those miles.

Theresa Stern: More hiking, yeah. Well, speaking of all those miles, you've been up to some pretty amazing stuff this last year. Can you tell us a little bit about what you've been up to with Thor, your new guide dog?

Mary Wilson: Sure. Mighty Thor and I, we have had a really busy first year and gosh, it's been almost a year and a half now, but this year, we had some big highlights. We got

to go to Yellowstone National Park and we did three days of hiking in the park, which was just utterly amazing. And then we got to do one day in Rocky Mountain National Park, so that I could just do some investigating and I know I've got to go back. And we also got to do some hiking in Colorado and that was just amazing to be among all the trees and in the mountains.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh. How does Thor guide you when you're on the trail? Because I know our dogs, they're taught how to guide us on streets and things like that, but what different accommodations or things that you have put together to make this work with Thor? And I know I think you've had some assistance from our amazing client services team as well in that, but if you could let our listeners know how that all works for you guys.

Mary Wilson: Sure. It actually for me and Thor started in training. We did in-home training this time and we got to do a little bit of just real easy hiking, while we were still training. And that was great because I got to have an instructor with us and we introduced Thor to the trekking pole, because I like to use that on my right side. And he was able to get used to the sound of it and just get used to it being there. And we made sure that that was a real positive experience for him and did some real easy hiking that was where you're on a really clear defined path.

And then after we graduated and had really solidified our urban guide work, we started to do more trails, but we started with ones that were really, really clear and easy to follow and then progressed to ones that are a little bit harder.

And we used things like the clicker to teach him to show me the trail signs, even if I can't always read them. When we go places like Shenandoah National Park and he sees the posts that mark the trailheads there, he'll make a beeline and then he gets jackpot food rewards. Using a lot of those tools I learned about in training, really applied. And then my field service manager, Will Henry, he's an avid hiker and backpacker. He's also just been a huge resource for me and has helped me troubleshoot little things if they popped up and things like that.

Theresa Stern: Now when you are going on these hikes, do you go by yourself or with other people? Or... Tell me about that.

Mary Wilson: I do both. I do. When it's a new trail I usually start out with other people. And we do it together, and then that way we can really pattern Thor and then we'll go and do it by ourself. But we have done a lot of trails for the first time on our own. And with that, I always make sure it's a trail that's well populated and that there's other people. And I let folks know ahead of time where I'm going and when I should be back and make sure it's going to be really clearly defined.

Theresa Stern: No, that totally makes sense. Now, I know for our recent virtual alumni reunion, you were telling some other of our alumni from Guide Dogs for the Blind about some special equipment and things that you keep on you while you're on these

hikes. The radio systems and just in the way that you do your first aid kit, can you tell us a little bit about that? Because I think it's brilliant.

Mary Wilson: Sure. So when I hike with other people, I carry one walkie-talkie from me and I give the other to somebody else. And that way, if we're out of cell phone range, I don't need to worry about that or dropping my phone and breaking it. The walkie-talkie is a lot sturdier, so if I drop it'll survive. And that's just such a great safety tool. And it enables us to hike independently at our own speed without feeling like we have to keep up with other people. And then I always take with me a two-way satellite communicator device. So it's a safety precaution. So if anything ever happened, I hurt myself or Thor got hurt, we would have a way to call for help if we weren't in cell phone range. So we always use all of the technology available to us to make it as safe as possible.

Theresa Stern: Wow, that's amazing. And then you've done some low-tech things too. Tell us about the first aid kit that you put together. I thought it was so smart the way you designed that.

Mary Wilson: So I thought about what's most likely to happen in terms of injury or what would be the most devastating if it happened. And so I consider it part of my first aid kit in that I always carry a water filter. And that way if we run out of water, Thor will always have clean water to drink and that will hopefully prevent stomach issues. But should they arise, I carry a prescription medication from the vet to treat stomach issues so that Thor would be comfortable and may not be impacted by that. And we carry our rough wear shoes and I check his feet whenever we take a water break to make sure those paws are fine. But I do carry some fur-friendly wrapping tape so that if he ever did get any kind of injury, we could wrap the paw.

Theresa Stern: That makes sense.

Mary Wilson: And keep him comfortable.

Theresa Stern: Cool. Now, does he usually hike in his booties? Does he have special equipment that he uses, too?

Mary Wilson: So it depends. He's got his rough wear shoes that we get when we graduate, and I've ordered some more of those that I do always carry. And that way if it's really rocky, we'll put the shoes on. Or if it's a day where it's hot and I'm worried that the ground might be too warm, we'll put those shoes on. Usually he prefers to hike au naturel with just those barefoot feet.

Theresa Stern: You could clamp on maybe a little easier and stuff.

Mary Wilson: He gets much better traction. But if it's really rocky, we put the shoes on. And we also wear the shoes if it's an urban trail because sometimes regrettably, in

those more urban environments, there might be glass on the trail that I don't know about. And so just as a precaution, we'll use the shoes.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Have you had any, I don't know, events that have happened that were a little bit... Where you got a little bit scared?

Mary Wilson: Definitely.

Theresa Stern: Anything harrowing? Tell us about those.

Mary Wilson: So the biggest one is when we've gotten off trail, and I don't... Usually what happens is they'll be either more tree branches hitting me in the face or more tree limbs blocking the path. So usually when that's happen, if it's one or two, that's one thing. But if there's to be a lot of obstacles in a row, it usually alerts me to, "Hey, something's not right." And then in that case, we turn around and backtrack. And if I need to, I'll stop and drink some water and take some deep breaths so that I don't panic. So that's our biggest challenge, I'd say, is when people unintentionally create social trails and groups will travel off the main path to make a shortcut. And it's so easy for us to think that that's the way we went ahead when it's not.

Theresa Stern: Right. Well, especially if you're on a single track anyway, I think it would be hard to know.

Mary Wilson: Exactly. Exactly. We've had that happen a few times, but I think by just making sure I'm really paying attention that when it does happen, I haven't gone too far before reversing course.

Theresa Stern: Right. And you have Thor with you, which...

Mary Wilson: I do, I do. So I'm not really alone. But you learn by doing. And so I always make sure that they're not going to be so long that it would be, if we do accidentally get off course and need to backtrack, that the total mileage won't be too much for Thor. So I always give us some cushion as well. And I would recommend that other folks do that with their dogs too.

Theresa Stern: That makes sense. So I know that you have a really ambitious goal for 2023. Do you want to tell our listeners a little bit about that?

Mary Wilson: Sure. So Thor and I are planning to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail next year. And several blind men have done it, including a graduate from Guide Dogs for the Blind. And I've always wanted to do that trail. And it's high time a woman, a blind woman does it.

Theresa Stern: That's right. Yes.

Mary Wilson: And to my knowledge and to that of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, legally a blind woman has not hiked yet. So if there is somebody, I don't know about it, but either way, I've just always wanted to do that and I just think it would be amazing. So that is what we're going to tackle next year.

Theresa Stern: So for folks who aren't familiar with the Appalachian Trail, do you want to let them know how far that is, where it starts, where it ends? Just a little bit about the adventure.

Mary Wilson: So it starts in Georgia, well, the Southern Terminus is in Georgia, outside Atlanta, a place called Springer Mountain. And then the northern terminus is in Maine at Mount Katahdin. So the trail changes a little bit in terms of mileage every year, but it's about 2,200 miles. I think this past year it was 2,192.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Mary Wilson: So it's long. And most people start at one end and go to the other. But we're going to do what's called a flip-flop. So we're going to start in Virginia and we're going to go north. And then when we get to Mount Katahdin, we'll come back and then go south to Georgia. And the benefit of that is we'll be able to avoid the crowds and it works out better for the ecology along the trail because you tend to get a lot of people starting in Georgia, heading toward Maine. And this sort of disperses the number of people on the trail. And then when I've looked at the elevation and things like that, and after talking to my field service manager, starting in let's say Damascus, Virginia, it would give me and Thor the chance to really get our trail legs before immediately facing some really hard climbing.

Theresa Stern: That makes sense. So how long do you think it's going to take you? It would take me probably a lifetime. But how long do you think it'll take you?

Mary Wilson: It's a great question. To technically do a thru-hike, you have to finish it within one calendar year. I know. I think realistically it's going to take us eight or nine months because I'm not going to be doing the miles that somebody that is sighted can do. With guide work, you're going a little slower. And I know there's going to be times where I might need a break or Thor might need a break. So I'm allowing myself or hoping to do it within eight or nine months.

Theresa Stern: Wow. So will you be sleeping out on the trail for some of that, going home for some? How does that work?

Mary Wilson: So that's the beauty and the pain of it. So I'll be carrying all of our stuff in my backpack.

Theresa Stern: Right. Yours and Thor's.

Mary Wilson: And Thor's.

Theresa Stern: Oh gotcha.

Mary Wilson: Most of the time we'll sleep on the trail, but we will go into town from time to time to resupply. I can only carry so much food at once, and I know Thor is going to need a lot more food than he's getting now. So we're going to do what's called resupply boxes where I'll mail stuff to different locations along the way. And then when I reach that point, go into town, pick it up, and then hopefully stay in a hostel or a motel for a night and then get back on the trail the next day. That way I can have a good shower.

Theresa Stern: I was going to say the shower situation would be pretty awesome after being [inaudible 00:15:28].

Mary Wilson: Exactly.

Theresa Stern: So what are you doing to prepare for this? Because I imagine it's not just something like, "Oh, I'd love to do this." So this year, I know you've been doing lots of hikes. Do you start to build up your mileage?

Mary Wilson: Exactly. And this is another way that Guide Dogs for the Blind Support Center has just been incredible. And it started with Frank where I asked about how do we safely increase our mileage to really reduce injury. And so when we're really training for something coming up, we add no more than one mile per week to our highest mileage day. So right now, Thor and I are at seven miles. And so we did seven miles yesterday, and then today we still did a couple miles, but taking it a little easy, and then tomorrow we'll do another high mileage day.

Usually we're pretty active, so usually we do four or five as our maintenance mileage, so to speak, and then build up from there. And I try to have it so that Thor and I are doing more miles in our day-to-day life than we'll be doing on the trail just because the trail's so much harder work where you've got these ups and these downs and it's so much mental work for both of us.

But that way it keeps it comfortable. And we do a lot of hills and things like that so that we both keep our muscles in good shape, but I'm more of the slow and steady approach. So we build up slowly, and it's worked for us so far. I know a lot of people are like, "Oh, I'm going to do high miles." I always do it with Thor, safety and comfort and happiness is my number one goal. So we add no more than one mile per week to our total mileage. But if you give yourself a month, that means at the end of the month, you can do four more miles than you did at the start.

Theresa Stern: Right, right. And you haven't injured yourself.

Mary Wilson: I've injured myself. Exactly. And I'll note that for that, Thor is very young, he just turned four. So that's something that I can do with a young dog where when

Frank and I were hiking and then he started to be more senior in years, I did it even more gradually because I just did not want him to get a injury.

Theresa Stern: That makes sense. Oh my gosh. So I know that people listening to this... If they're Guide Dog graduates or Guide Dogs for the Blind alumni or friends and family in the community, if somebody's interested in getting into outdoor lifestyle, how would you suggest people get started?

Mary Wilson: I think it's really great to just start with your local city park, and check out if they have any trails and start on something that's a dirt path, which is gentle on the paws and gentle on the human. And then work up from there. And at some point think about adding a tracking pole on the right side. And for me, what's worked really well is after talking to my field service manager, I decided to use a longer handle on the harness when I'm hiking compared to an urban life. And that's because if we're going up a really steep hill sometimes, or if it's a super narrow trail, I have to go behind Thor and your arm is really stretched out. So having a harness handle that's a little longer can really help with the comfort when you're hiking hour after hour.

I'd say start small and make it a really fun, positive experience and bring those food rewards and you'll be generous with them and bring your gentle leader or your high nylon collar, even if you don't typically use it, just because there's a lot of exciting scents out there.

Theresa Stern: That's [inaudible 00:19:27] too. How about food reward for the people too, right?

Mary Wilson: Exactly. I always have my Snickers bar. But to start out small and make it really fun and you've got a Guide Dogs for the Blind alumni chapter that you're active in, maybe think about doing a group hike and that way not so overwhelming when you're not the only one doing it. And then the other thing I would recommend is to pick a trail or a path where pet dogs are required to be leashed.

Theresa Stern: Oh, very good point. Yes.

Mary Wilson: That's my other tip. And some places are better about enforcing that than others, but that can just make it a much more fun and safe experience.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. Absolutely. So, wow. Gosh, this is just an amazing adventure that you're on. What are you really hoping to gain from this big challenge?

Mary Wilson: Well, there's all the personal benefits to me that just come with being outdoors and getting in the fresh air and the exercise. But I really hope to share with the people I meet along the way and the people following that if you acquire a disability in life that that doesn't mean your life is over. You can still do whatever it is that you want to do. And I want people that don't have disabilities

to know that just because someone acquires one or they're born with a disability, it doesn't change what they're able to achieve.

And I also just want people to really see, in all honesty the power of a relationship that comes with a working dog, like a guide dog. I mean, I know there's blind folks out there that can hike without a guide dog. That is not me. It will never be me. I have to have my guide dog with me and he has to be in his Guide Dog for the Blind harness for me to get the feedback that I need about the trail. I know some folks have different techniques, but for me I've got to have that handle in my hand and I just want people to see the power that relationship just brings. I mean, really restored my ability to get outdoors, which is something that I loved doing as a sighted person. And I'm just so grateful to be able to do it again. So I just hope that people will, it'll take away some of the fear that people might have around disability and that people will really see the power that comes between a handler and the service dog.

And also, frankly, I want disabled people, and especially blind women to know that the outdoors is for everybody. It's for all of us. We don't need to be professional athletes to get out there as long as we have a plan and work toward it. And so, I mean, I'll just be happy for everyday Thor and I are able to be out there and experience nature. And the hiking community tends to be a really great one, so just being able to interact. But I also hope to sort of share those messages with the folks I meet as well.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Well, I love this. I love this. I'm feeling inspired. I might even go walk around the block.

Mary Wilson: I recommend a red wine and I value food rewards for the human.

Theresa Stern: That's actually a really great idea. Okay. I am definitely extra inspired now. Well, thank you so much, Mary. I hope that you'll keep us posted along the way.

Mary Wilson: Definitely. Definitely.

Theresa Stern: So we can keep our listeners rooting you along your journey. But I think this is going to be an amazing trip for you. I think I just love this bond that you have with Thor and I wish you the very best of luck.

Mary Wilson: Thank you.

Theresa Stern: For more information about Guide Dogs for the Blind, please visit guidedogs.com.