

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

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Central Bark. We have a fantastic episode for you planned today. Today my guest is Jason Doorish, or should I say Dr. Jason Doorish? He is our psychosocial support specialist here at Guide Dogs for the Blind. He's also one of our GDB alumni, working with his third guide dog, Morey. So welcome, Jason.

Jason Doorish: Thanks, Theresa.

Theresa Stern: Do I have to call you Dr. Jason?

Jason Doorish: You do not. Jason is totally fine.

Theresa Stern: Awesome. So, Jason, tell us a little bit about how you became connected to Guide Dogs for the Blind and then a little bit about the role that you're playing now as a staff member.

Jason Doorish: Sure. So I have retinitis pigmentosa, so I lost the majority of my eyesight very, very quickly in my early 20s, and my orientation and mobility instructor when I was doing about a year and a half of really intense orientation and mobility told me, "You'd be an excellent guide dog candidate." She encouraged me at that time to apply to Guide Dogs for the Blind, and I had no idea what I was getting into.

So in the summer of 2007 I went to the Oregon campus and received my first guide dog, Benny. I remember picking up the handle for the first time and went, "Oh, gosh, I feel so free. It's like dancing." And, oh my God, what am I doing? I'm hurdling through space.

Theresa Stern: Right. Yeah. It's a whole different experience than working with a cane. Yeah.

Jason Doorish: So I got my first guide in 2007 and worked Benny until 2017, when I was just about to retire him, when he had a massive grand mal seizure at work and unfortunately died pretty soon thereafter.

Theresa Stern: Oh, poor guy.

Jason Doorish: So at the time I was working full time, but I was also a doctoral candidate, working on my dissertation. Fortunately/unfortunately, I did research on the experience of the first time guide dog handler, so it was at that time that he passed away, analyzing my data, and too a lot of that grieving process was trying to read other peoples' responses about how much their guide dog meant to them, and crying my office.

Theresa Stern: Oh, my goodness. That's like just a little close to home.

Jason Doorish: Yeah. It was tough. But it took me about a year to kind of decide to reapply, because I don't know for all of us, I can only speak for myself, the first guide dog is really an intimately relationship. It was totally different from when I first got Benny to when Benny passed.

So I got my second guide, and my second guide failed pretty quickly, and I was like, "I can't do this. I can't do it." Then the pandemic hit, and so I... Stacy Ellison, my wait list contact called, and said, "We have your dog," and I said, "I don't know if I can do this." She called back two days later and went, "No, no, really we have your dog."

Theresa Stern: Good girl, Stacy. Yeah.

Jason Doorish: So I'm currently working Morey, and they were totally right. Morey is perfect and kind and gentle and does excellent guide work, and I'm so glad my loved ones were like, "No, no, really."

Theresa Stern: "You can do this."

Jason Doorish: "You can do this." Because, again you're working, what, your fourth dog?

Theresa Stern: My fourth one. Yeah. Yeah.

Jason Doorish: It's tough, especially when you take a break between, thanks COVID. It can be pretty challenging, but I'm so glad I did.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely.

Jason Doorish: And then last summer my wife poke me and said, "Hey, Guide Dogs has a job posting." I was like "What? How did I not see that?"

Theresa Stern: I'm glad somebody reads my emails, even if it's your wife.

Jason Doorish: Yeah. Absolutely. This was a Facebook posting, so I figured it was marketing.

Theresa Stern: Okay. Fair enough.

Jason Doorish: It wasn't you. I think it was-

Theresa Stern: Nobody does read my emails. Okay. Good. Okay.

Jason Doorish: No comment. Yeah, so I applied and I got the job in August, and it's been such a lovely change. So I've been working as a professional mental health counselor in the state of Texas for the past almost 16 years in a variety of settings, colleges, community mental health centers, in-patient rehab centers, I run a private practice.

So I was really glad to come onto Guide Dogs. Just a very lovely and very delightful experience. One of the things that we're really trying to do and really trying to highlight in my role is that I can provide peer support, I can provide education, and it can really... One of the things I've done a lot with people is help them find the resources in their local area.

Theresa Stern: It's so important and it's so hard right now to find mental health resources.

Jason Doorish: Again, I had somebody in northern California... I called 35 therapists and got one guy to call me back and said, "No one is taking clients in this entire county," and I was like, "Okay. Well, keep trying."

Theresa Stern: Keep trying. Yeah.

Jason Doorish: But, again, also kind of my title is psychosocial support specialist, so often what people are calling... In general I talk to people once or twice. I'm not having generally like extensively long relationships with people, but a lot of it is around is it time to retire my dog? My dog just got diagnosed with cancer. Should I apply for another dog? My dog died.

Or a lot of the other programs I'm helping with are K9 Buddy, and also orientation and mobility immersion, so it's been really good for me to also talk to the orientation and mobility people who may have just recently lost their vision and talk about rolling back in time to when I had to go through all of that and do all that sort of stuff, and helping them, and the same thing, getting them hooked up with resources.

I think one of the most... I don't want to say it's surprising, but I was unfamiliar with the K9 Buddy Program, so one of the interesting things for me has been helping people where they're like, "Oh, I've had guide dog and my lifestyle has changed," and being able to have another program to mention to them really seems to get them excited.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah. I was curious about your... I believe you did your dissertation on the guide dog experience and how that helped to... Or it doesn't help... How it affects the guide dog handler, and I'm just wondering what you learned from that, and are you feeling like you're seeing a lot of that sort of in real life now, working with different clients?

Jason Doorish: Yeah. Absolutely. And I think the need here... The thing I found in my research was we were looking how does the introduction of a dog guide into the family system affect the handler and affect the family system. One of the number one things that came out was the family gets jealous.

Theresa Stern: Right.

Jason Doorish: Right? The partner gets jealous.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Jason Doorish: There's family dynamics. It's the first time the person who's disabled has to set boundaries in their family. It's the first time they have to say to their mom and dad, "Hey, you can't do that." It's the first time their out walking independently. And from my own experience, it freaked my parents out.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Mine too. Yeah.

Jason Doorish: Right?

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Jason Doorish: To go from walking with a cane, where when I work a guide dog around my parents the number one thing is, "Oh, my God, you're walking so fast, you're walking so fast." Then I'm like, "Guys, I've got it."

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah.

Jason Doorish: I do think a lot of what my research has enabled me to do is to be able to give words to that. When I'm talking to people, when they call and say, "Man, this is really frustrating. My parents, they don't want me to go out," or, "My spouse is upset that I'm paying more attention to the dog," and I can say, "Yeah. Absolutely." That's what my research found. That's what I found.

When my spouse and I first started dating she told me one of the hardest things was how much of visibility there was. She's like, "We're not invisible anymore. We're not just a couple at the grocery store."

Theresa Stern: Right. You're like a celebrity.

Jason Doorish: Right. You're like a celebrity. She's like, "It's really hard to go from anonymity to like oh, my God, all these people are talking to us."

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. For maybe some of our listeners who might be having some of those family dynamic situations in their lives right now, what advice do you give folks?

Jason Doorish: It depends on the situation.

Theresa Stern: Totally. I agree.

Jason Doorish: Well, and I feel that way because it really does, right? But where I go with it is it's a matter of safety and it's a matter of independence and confidence. The majority of the time when I talk to our clients and give them strategies and give them techniques on how to talk to their family it goes okay, or I've even had

couples hop on the phone and be like, "Hey, can you help me with this," and I'm like, "Okay. Sure." You guys are both here and that sort of thing.

But also that's where I get really clear on here's what I can help you with, how to language this, but if you need more help in specifics, if you need family therapy, I can help you find a family therapist.

Theresa Stern: That's great.

Jason Doorish: That's really the kind of pivot point of like here are some basic skills I can teach you, but if this is how your marriage, for instance, has been for 50 years I can't do marriage therapy on 50 years of your husband or your wife always being the same way.

Theresa Stern: That's right. That's right. I love that Guide Dogs for the Blind as a program has really sort of expanded our services and kind of understands how many pieces, touchpoints of things that really affect a person's ability to be successful with a guide dog. Can you talk a little bit about sort of our holistic interdisciplinary kind of philosophy about serving clients?

Jason Doorish: Of course. For me it's this interesting thing of being a handler and then coming to work here. I think the most shocking... I was like, "Man, you guys really care." I guess I have to say we really care now, but it's still... I started in August, so there's still this element of man, the organization as a whole really wants to meet people where they are. I look at the orientation and immersion program, the K9 Buddy program for the kids, the K9 Buddy program as adults, the guide dog program, and some of the stuff they're doing in the orientation and mobility program with having other services come in and help people.

And I think that's one of the things that I bring to the table, is kind of that holistic approach of reaching out to people. A lot of what I've been trying to do is when I see things come across, or somebody's dog passes away, or this or that, I'm proactively reaching out. I'm giving them information, finding them grief groups, finding them people to really get them connected, instead of waiting for them to reach out to me.

Theresa Stern: Right. That's really cool, because I think sometimes people shy away from that a little bit too. Then another piece I think, and you said about it in your own story about some transitioning from one dog to another, I think something that you do with each of our classes is that transition, sort of peer support group. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Jason Doorish: Yeah. So every Monday now I'm running a support group during the training process so we have a chance to talk about fears and hopes and griefs and sadness and frustrations and hope and-

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Jason Doorish: It's interesting, I've run groups for a long time and there's always a fear of oh, man, I hope this goes well. And in all of the groups I've run there are these beautiful conversations of people just sharing. Fundamentally on paper walking through space with a dog guiding you is crazy.

Theresa Stern: It's crazy, right? I know. Who figured that out?

Jason Doorish: Right. Who was like, "Hey, this is a good idea. Let's get people that can't see a dog." Right?

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Jason Doorish: And really having a place to talk about it's not the absence of fear of have the a visual impairment or blindness. It's having the fear, and being around people, and learning from other people, and realizing that courage is fear of walking, right? Courage is the ability to... I'm afraid, I'm scared, I don't know how those are going to work out, and doing it anyway.

So a lot of those conversations have been a lot about resilience and a lot about the ability to work through this is terrifying. There's an inherent struggle and fear and anxiety and all of those things that we have as being somebody who is blind or visually impaired, and what the dog does it gives you another tool, and it gives you another layer of confidence, and it gives you another layer of freedom, and it gives you another layer of that, while simultaneously you now have a two-year-old with you all the time.

It barks and it poops, and you have to pack a bag, and you worry about it, right? So, again, a lot of the conversations have been really great. We're having that ability to talk about the good, the bad, and the ugly of what it means to be either a first time guide dog handler or an eighth time guide dog handler.

Theresa Stern: Right. Right. Changing. Every one of those dogs is different, and building that trust is so important. Somebody used the term the other day radical trust, and it really kind of is, right?

Jason Doorish: Yeah. Oh, kind of? I mean absolutely. Again, back again to I'm hurdling through space and I assume my dog isn't going to stop at the curb.

Theresa Stern: Right. Right. We're not chasing a squirrel, right? We're going to Starbucks.

Jason Doorish: Right. Pretty sure we're going to Starbucks.

Theresa Stern: Oh, my goodness. Well, Jason and I were sharing a funny story before we started recording. It was about his basset hounds, so not only does Jason have his lovely Morey at home, but he has two other dogs. Can you tell us a little bit your basset hounds?

Jason Doorish: Yeah. We have a male basset hound named Bruno who's 67 pounds.

Theresa Stern: Holy moly. That's as big as my Labrador.

Jason Doorish: Yeah. And he's the fun police. He's very, very serious and wants no one to have... We joke about that. He's always investigating and he's like hey, is anyone having fun? Because his sister, Robin, who is about 47 pounds and also a basset, he's always like, hey, what are you doing? Stop having fun. And he'll tell on her if she's doing something.

Theresa Stern: You told us the story about how Morey has been using them as a jungle gym, so do you want to tell us about that?

Jason Doorish: Indeed. One of the great things about having a bulldog in the house is I found out very quickly that Morey being able to play with the other dogs hasn't actually affected her guide work at all, so she's free... They're free to play.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah. Of course. It's good for them. Yeah.

Jason Doorish: Yeah. Absolutely. So in the backyard Morey, often when she gets the complete zoomies, will use the basset hounds as playing as hurdles, and she will literally jump over them repeatedly, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth-

Theresa Stern: I love it.

Jason Doorish: ...because they can't get her or chase her when she's jumping over them like that.

Theresa Stern: Well, they're so low to the ground. I just love that.

Jason Doorish: Exactly.

Theresa Stern: That's awesome. I love it. I love that story.

Jason Doorish: Yeah. And of course Bruno is standing there the whole time barking and going hey, don't have fun. Stop this.

Theresa Stern: Stop it already. Life is serious.

Jason Doorish: He's a very serious gentleman.

Theresa Stern: Oh, my gosh. Well it has been truly delightful chatting with you, Jason, and we are so lucky to have you on the team at Guide Dogs for the Blind. Can you tell folks how they can connect with you if they want to reach out?

Jason Doorish: Yeah. Absolutely. You can call the 1-800 number. I'm in the phone tree. You can call the Support Center, you can get transferred to me. Then my email address is

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just very simple. It's jdoorish, like the door, so it's D-O-O-R-I-S-H,  
@guidedogs.com.

Theresa Stern: Right. Thank you. Thank you so much for being here, and thank you for all you do for Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Jason Doorish: Thanks, Theresa.

Theresa Stern: For more information about Guide Dogs for the Blind please visit [guidedogs.com](http://guidedogs.com).