

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

All right. Hello everyone, and welcome to Central Bark. Today we have a very extraordinarily special, and cool guest. His name is Amit Ahuja. He is an alumni of Guide Dogs for the Blind, and on our Guide Dogs for the Blind board of directors. Welcome to Central Bark, Amit.

Amit Ahuja: Thank you so much, Theresa. It's so lovely to be here, and I love the name of podcast.

Theresa Stern: Isn't it cute? Yes.

Amit Ahuja: Yes, absolutely.

Theresa Stern: Yes, yes. So why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, Amit, your background, and let us know a little bit about you.

Amit Ahuja: So, I'm a professor of political science at UC Santa Barbara. I grew up in India, got a fellowship to study in England, and got my PhD from the University of Michigan. Now I just teach on the beach, as they say.

Theresa Stern: It's too bad you're not very accomplished, oh yes?

Amit Ahuja: Yeah, so I've been at UC Santa Barbara for a while now. Soon after I joined the university, I got this very special friend of mine, Tashi. He and I became a team and it just completely changed my life. He's somebody I'll be telling you a little bit more about today. Other than that, my wife lives in Washington, DC. So there are three of us, as we often joke, in our marriage. She, I, and United Airlines.

Theresa Stern: I love it.

Amit Ahuja: I love reading, I love traveling. I'm a huge fan of British comedy. So yeah, that's about me.

Theresa Stern: I saw that in your bio, Amit, and I've known you for a while and I didn't realize that. Are you a Monty Python guy?

Amit Ahuja: Yes, I'm a Monty Python guy. I am a Yes, Prime Minister guy.

Theresa Stern: Gotcha.

Amit Ahuja: It's the whole shebang, as you say. I'm a huge fan, and yes, that's one of my dark secrets.

Theresa Stern: I love it, I love it. So tell me a little bit about your decision and why you decided to pursue the guide dog lifestyle?

Amit Ahuja: I live on a campus where there are lots of skateboarders and folks on bikes. It's a very busy campus. I thought that I'd be able to find my way around, and navigate the challenges with a cane. It was coming to a point where that was becoming a little bit more difficult than I had anticipated. So there was this conversation between my wife and I, that look, I should think about the guide dog lifestyle. I had this great apprehension. I was like, "If I bring the guide dog into my life, I have to be responsible for it. I'll have to take care of the dog, I don't know how I'll do it."

Theresa Stern: Yeah. I know.

Amit Ahuja: I'm sure you've heard this, and a lot of people go through this. Then I took the leap and decided to try it out. Even as I was going through training, I would say the first couple days soon after I met Tashi, I could just see that all this while that I had had all these concerns and apprehensions, I was just completely wrong about it.

Theresa Stern: Wow, yeah. Right?

Amit Ahuja: It was a transformation.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Amit Ahuja: The feeling of independence, the freedom was just something else.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Amit Ahuja: And then I think, and what has been really, really remarkable is the concerns I had about being responsible are not concerns anymore, because I am responsible for my guide. But that's a responsibility I embrace, it's a responsibility I am just so glad that I have. I trust him. He trusts me. And I have to be worthy of that trust.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, that's awesome. It's sort of a labor. Oh, it's labor, but it's a labor of love, right?

Amit Ahuja: It's a labor of love, yes.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. I actually, I heard a cute quote this morning. I was talking to another one of our people who've graduated from Guide Dogs for the Blind and she mentioned something, a heartbeat by my feet. And I thought that was really kind of a great way of thinking about that too. Just something special with you all the time. So Amit, was Tashi the first dog that you've had in your life or had you had other dogs?

Amit Ahuja: Yes.

Theresa Stern: Really? Okay.

Amit Ahuja: No, so yeah. So, Tashi was ... so I've had other dogs. I grew up around dogs.

Theresa Stern: Oh you did? Yeah.

Amit Ahuja: Yes. But Tashi was my first guide dog.

Theresa Stern: Wow. What was it like the first time you met Tashi? Do you remember that day?

Amit Ahuja: Anyone who's had a guide dog cannot forget that moment when you first meet your guide, and the guide walks through the door and yeah, it's something else. They come, and Tashi came in, he sniffed me, it was the tail wag the excitement. They're Labradors, they are just bundle of joy and love. I mean, I wish I had the words to describe it. It's just pure emotion, and it's a moment which is etched in my memory and will probably be with me for the rest of my life.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah. So tell me a little bit, I know that you teach the political science area and that you're very ... tell me a little bit about your field of study. And I just wonder how that lines up a little bit with the vision of guide dogs about inclusion and have you experienced that inclusion that we hope happens when somebody has a guide dog by their side?

Amit Ahuja: Yeah. So, it's so interesting because my research and research focus and I study actually political inclusion and exclusion. I study this in different contexts in politics. And what is really interesting is that frankly a lot of these interests came about way before I got a guide dog.

Theresa Stern: Of course. Yeah.

Amit Ahuja: And it's in that respect, this is work that I've been doing, but the guide dog experience for me, I would say has been very different simply because it's very personal. It's living this idea myself, that's where the difference is. And I'll tell you for me, it's about independence. It's about being able to do things that slowly I wasn't able to do. Being able to travel independently, step outside my house, go walk across my campus, go do my own grocery shopping. Things that I was able, those freedoms that I was not able to enjoy. But the fact of the matter is that once, ultimately when we think about inclusion, inclusion is about belonging. And you can make a claim to belonging. You can ask to be included when you are equal. And without independence, that claim to equality isn't there. As long as you're going to be dependent on others, how do you claim equality? And when you can do that, when you can become independent, when you can enjoy freedoms, that's when you can make a claim to equality and that's when you belong.

Theresa Stern: Right. Right. So there's a lot of synergies there with ...

Amit Ahuja: Yeah. And some of these things that I see in my lived experience, I also find these in my work. In very different context, mind you, but yeah, it's very interesting to think through some of this.

Theresa Stern: Excellent. Can you share maybe an experience that brings that to life for you, maybe that affected you or your family, as that independence came to you and that feeling of inclusion? Do you have some scenarios of experiences that happened to you that can illustrate that for us?

Amit Ahuja: Yeah, of course. I have to say, so a lot of my friends, especially my friends I've had for a long time have seen me and seen my life when I did not have a guide. And what the changes that have come about. And so they, for example, they see that difference. And I know the joy that brings to them. But I'll tell you, this is soon after, I think maybe even a couple weeks after I got Tashi, I just settled back into my campus and my mother was visiting at that time.

Theresa Stern: Oh boy. Wow. Okay. Yeah.

Amit Ahuja: And she hadn't seen me with a guide dog, we talked about it. She was very ambivalent about getting a guide, and she did not know how it works and how this experience would play out. And we go back a long, since my childhood, we've had this longstanding habit of going for long walks.

Theresa Stern: Oh that's so nice.

Amit Ahuja: And so we were just walking. We went out for a walk, but this time I had Tashi with me, and we were just walking around the lagoon on campus and I was chatting away to her as, as we usually do. And suddenly I discovered my mother was no longer working with me. And I was like, what happened here? And I pretty confused. So I stopped, I had to retrace my steps, and my mother called out, I found she was just sitting on a bench. And I was like, "What happened?"

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Are you okay?

Amit Ahuja: Are you okay, exactly. I'm very confused. I was like, what's going on here? And I could tell she had tears in her eyes. And she's like, "Look, when you are young, we would go out for walks and we would walk really fast. And then slowly as you began to lose your vision, we'd slow down. I had to pay attention to you while walking. You were a little bit more tentative about walking fast. And to see you walk like this now," she says, "I could not believe it. I did not know if this was going to be possible." And my friends see the same thing when they see me walking down the street, they see me walking into a restaurant, and navigating my way around tables, going into a building, finding an elevator. It's a different me. And they have seen somebody who struggled with some of these things earlier.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Well, just thinking about your mom and thinking about how much she probably worried about you. Sometimes it didn't really think about that, and then to see you just out there just had-

Amit Ahuja: No, absolutely.

Theresa Stern: That's just a beautiful story, Amit.

Amit Ahuja: It is. And I can I tell you something I think about, you know we have the canine body program for kids. We have our GDB camps. And I often, sometimes with introducing children to guide dogs at such an early stage, it of course makes a big difference to them. But you know who else it matters to? It matters to the parents.

Theresa Stern: Oh yes, absolutely.

Amit Ahuja: Because they can see that their children actually can lead independent lives. I wish my parents knew that [inaudible 00:13:13] because they had these concerns.

Theresa Stern: Yes. Oh, I'm sure.

Amit Ahuja: And to see that go away with Tashi, and my mother saw it for the first time, that's special.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. It just brings home to me that these dogs it's like my guide dog too, they do so much for me, but there's so many ripples that go out, they touch so many lives in the work that they do. So, that's excellent. So now, obviously Amit, you served on the alumni association board of directors, and now you're on Guide Dogs for the Blind's corporate board of directors. Can you tell me little bit about your role there and what that meant to you?

Amit Ahuja: Well, that's been a fabulous experience for all kinds of reasons. For me, when I joined the alumni board, it was just being surrounded by folks who were of course all guide dog users and GDB alumni. But who were just really fabulous, accomplished individuals in their own right. And as I've graduated to the board, I joined the board last year. And so just think about it, I joined the board when the pandemic had just begun.

Theresa Stern: Yes, you did.

Amit Ahuja: And what hasn't the pandemic tune at us at GDB?

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Amit Ahuja: So, for me, the reason I've joined the board is because of my own experience as an alumni with GDB and just what I had seen over the years. But to now see

GDB confronting some of these challenges in real time and to be part of some of those discussions, or at least have a ringside view on that, that just makes me really proud. And for me just being involved in these conversations, it's been a very special experience, because while the going is good organizations do well. The true test that separates the wheat from the chaff, as they say, comes when the going gets tough. And I think it's just remarkable as to how GDB has responded. Ours is a small board, but a very committed, deeply engaged board. And for me, it's been an inspirational experience, frankly.

Theresa Stern: Well, I want to thank you personally for your leadership in that as a member of that board. And I agree, I think Guide Dogs has done an amazing job of getting through this crazy couple years. Speaking of which, how's the pandemic been for you? Just personally, and also teaching on a campus?

Amit Ahuja: We just can't wait for it to get over, like the rest of humanity.

Theresa Stern: Enough. Yes.

Amit Ahuja: Look, there have been challenges, like everyone else. Teaching remotely, as you know, everyone has done it because there was no choice. I can't say I've enjoyed it. And being away from campus, being away from students, that's been tough. So, fully we're back to face-to-face again, and this time the pandemic will not return, but there've been other challenges which have been unique in some ways. A lot of the technology that got rolled out that we've used actively now had accessibility issues, and they've all shown up at the same time. So, whether it's Zoom, whether it's ... going to a grocery store is difficult because Tashi's not trained to tell who who's wearing a mask and who isn't.

Theresa Stern: That's right. Yeah.

Amit Ahuja: And people can understandably get concerned if you go too close to them. But going to grocery websites or these things works if they're accessible.

Theresa Stern: If they're accessible.

Amit Ahuja: You can order food, if those online applications are accessible. And some of those accessibility issues have definitely impacted and curtailed one's life. But as said, I think most of, I would say the one thing that I've missed a lot is, research is my oxygen in many ways. And not being able to travel for research, that's been tough. But the good things, and there are silver linings everywhere.

Theresa Stern: There you go, yes. Yes.

Amit Ahuja: We're finally actually talking about some of these online accessibility issues that have do with software. These things have always been around, but we haven't had conversations around them, but finally we are doing that. I like that. There's one more good thing that I have to tell you.

Theresa Stern: Okay. I'm ready.

Amit Ahuja: When I teach in a classroom, in these college classes, and I'm building up to an argument, just at that important point, the point where the big line is coming, Tashi will yawn very loudly, and my entire class just giggles. So, if there's one good thing I can say about Zoom teaching, is that I've been spared those yawns by my guide.

Theresa Stern: He doesn't upstage you anymore.

Amit Ahuja: Well let's just say, it may be an honest assessment of my teaching style and content, but I'd much rather get private.

Theresa Stern: I love it. Oh my gosh. Speaking of being on a college campus and with a guide dog, do you have any funny anecdotes or things that have happened on campus?

Amit Ahuja: Tashi and I, in terms of our many episodes have always ... It's really interesting because in some ways he is really calm, very competent, really good in terms of navigating the different challenges, but at the same time he's also a Labrador and he likes to, when the harness comes off, he's very playful and it's very interesting. I have to say, especially when he was like a younger dog, he'd argue he's still very young.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Amit Ahuja: And I told you that we have this lagoon, so we would walk past it. And Tashi's always been very curious about ducks. And that's a dangerous curiosity for a guide dog.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. It is.

Amit Ahuja: So I have to say every time we went past and I could sort of see his, you know you can get a sense from how he's moving that he's getting a little bit distracted. I would pray to all the gods that our trainers pray to that, please, I hope he doesn't take me into the water. And I'm happy to report that he, as fascinated as he was with the ducks, we managed to avoid that.

Theresa Stern: To avoid it. Okay. All right. Because we could set you up with some scuba gear just in case, right?

Amit Ahuja: Yes, absolutely. Yeah, exactly. As I said, right, in GDB, we train you for everything.

Theresa Stern: Well, all possibilities.

Amit Ahuja: Yes.

Theresa Stern: So as you know, we're celebrating our 80th anniversary, which is pretty amazing here at Guide Dogs for the Blind. So if you had a crystal ball to look into, what do you think 80 years from now, might we be seeing in the future for guide dogs, or what do you hope to see?§

Amit Ahuja: Some of the initiatives that the GDB has at the moment in its strategic plan, where we're thinking broadly about engaging with a lifestyle of a blind individual and the kind of skill sets that we need. I think that is a part that would really take our organization to new heights as things change. I think if I were to make a prediction, 80 years down the line, by that time, you would've had your first guide, first team in space.

Theresa Stern: Oh, yeah. That's a cool one.

Amit Ahuja: How are we going to train a guide dog to be at the international space station? That's something we'll figure out.

Theresa Stern: That's right. Zero gravity dog. I love it. Yes.

Amit Ahuja: Absolutely. But I don't say this in a facetious manner at all. I think that's possible, and again, so I think blind folks are going to go different places. The guides are going to go there with them. Oftentimes they're going to make it possible for blind folks to go different places. So yes, in that sense, I think interesting, fascinating times ahead. Ours has been a fabulous journey until now, and I think the next 80 years are going to be equally fabulous, if not more.

Theresa Stern: I agree. I agree. It'll be fun to see how all that comes together in time. Well, Amit, thank you so much for joining me today on Central Bark. Super appreciate you coming by.

Amit Ahuja: Thank you for inviting me. This was so much fun. Conversations with you, Theresa are always fun.

Theresa Stern: Oh, right, back at you, Amit.

Amit Ahuja: Yes. No, but like I said, I think this is such an honor for me. And being with guide dogs both as a guide dog user, but now as a board member, it's just been such a special experience, so thank you. Thank you for inviting me.

Theresa Stern: Great. Thank you.

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