

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

Hello, everybody, and welcome to Central Bark. Today we are everything puppy raising. We're talking about raising a puppy, and changing a life. So glad you were able to join us. Today, I have two amazing guests with me. We have Alex Gregory, who is a Community Field Representative for Guide Dogs for the Blind, and we have Mary Clark, who's one of our amazing puppy raisers. Let's get started. Alex, tell us a little bit about your role as a Community Field Representative for Guide Dogs for the Blind, and a little bit about how you got there.

Alex Gregory: I am a Community Field Rep for Southern and Central Coast California, and like the 11 other CFRs, each of us are responsible for about 80 puppies, in their development through socialization, basic obedience, and various training aspects before they come in for recall to hopefully become guides, breeders, and canine buddies. Then I'm also responsible for helping assist and support our thousands of puppy raising volunteers. I might evaluate puppies, and see how they're progressing, offer troubleshooting support for behavior challenges. In terms of how I got here, that's a really good question. I, like many people who love animals, really wanted to be a vet for a long time. I decided that I really preferred the behavior side of things, and training and working closely with people is where my heart fell. I really wanted to work for non-profits, and found Guide Dogs for the Blind where it culminated all of the things that I was really looking to do, working with adorable animals, working with incredible volunteers, teaching, and for an awesome mission. That's how I ended up here.

Theresa Stern: I was reading in your bio, and I didn't realize this about you, Alex, that you used to work with exotic animals. Were there any similarities, or crazy differences, between training one of our guide dog puppies and one of the exotic animals you've worked with in the past?

Alex Gregory: I have worked with a number of exotic species. I've worked with elephants, dolphins, sea lions, a variety of farm animals, reptiles, birds, all kinds of things. They're very different than dogs. Dogs are incredible animals, right? We know that. That's why we work with them. They love people. They love to please. They love to train. Our dogs, particularly, love food, which is also helpful in training. Some of the other species that I've worked with, not so interested in working collaboratively with people. They are really interesting in their own way, and really intelligent species. Honestly, every animal I've worked with has been really cool. An interesting and challenging experience for sure. Each animal's different.

Theresa Stern: Very cool. I had to ask, because that always intrigues me to see the background that some of our staff members have that I think leads people to this career. Then you bring so much richness with you when you come, so that's excellent. Mary, our amazing puppy raiser, I read that you have been raising puppies for

Guide Dogs for the Blind for 10 years, and you're raising a little puppy right now named Cello. Is that right?

Mary Clark: That is correct. Yes.

Theresa Stern: Is that a Labrador puppy or Golden Retriever?

Mary Clark: She's a black Labrador puppy. She's about four and a half months. She's actually a puppy of another dog that I raised.

Theresa Stern: Oh, no way. She's a legacy puppy. That is so cool. How many puppies have you raised over the years?

Mary Clark: She is my number 10. I've had 10 puppies. Yes.

Theresa Stern: What made you decide that you wanted to get into raising puppies?

Mary Clark: Interesting. I taught at Cierritos Community College, and my office was right down the hall from a Xerox machine. A colleague of mine, who was a geologist, came in every night I taught with a guide dog puppy. He was training a guide dog puppy, and I would stop and ask him questions. I think that went on for a year or two until he finally said, "You've asked me enough questions. You have to come to one of our meetings." I started going to meetings, and that was in 2010. By that fall, I was raising a puppy that had come down to go to a charitable event. His name was Phil, and Betty White held him. He was a puppy in the pictures of Betty White, oftentimes. It was his claim to fame. Anyways, it's fun.

Theresa Stern: You've been with us for about 12 years, raised 10 puppies. Tell us a little bit about the journey with a puppy so people get an idea of how all that works. For how long you have them, and what you with them through.

Mary Clark: Sure. We get them when they're somewhere between eight and 10 weeks old. Guide Dogs for the Blind has done an amazing job with these puppies even before they come to us. There's a Heroes Academy, and they socialize in so many different ways. When they come to us, they're ready to learn. We have lots of different games and activities that Guide Dogs for the Blind has helped us develop for teaching these little puppies. To watch these little puppies from the time they're eight weeks old, be so enthusiastic about learning makes me want to cry, because they're so much fun. Anyways, we raise them and socialize them until they're somewhere between, oh, maybe 15 and 18 months old. Then that's when they return to campus for their formal training. They're with us for somewhere between 12 and 15 months.

Theresa Stern: That's so amazing. It really is. I have to say, having had four of my own guide dogs, I can't say how much I appreciate all the work that the puppy raisers of my guide dogs have put in, that first year of puppyhood, to make them the mature,

and responsible, and loving dogs when I get them. Alex, do you want to tell us a little bit about the development of the puppies in different ways, the stages they go through as puppies along their journey, maybe some of the skills and things that they learn so that they can really succeed either as a guide dog, or a canine buddy, or maybe in our breeding program?

Alex Gregory: Our volunteer puppy raisers take on the really dynamic and challenging task of teaching these puppies how to be really well behaved in the home, which is a really important thing in becoming a guide, a breeder, or a canine buddy. We need good house behavior.

Theresa Stern: I bet you're going to have a lot of parents writing in to say, "Can we send you our kids?"

Alex Gregory: Honestly, sometimes puppies are easier to teach than people. Yeah. They do house behavior training, basic obedience. They'll teach puppy how to sit, stand, come when called. They also do relieving on command. One of the really incredible things that our puppies do is only on command do they relieve in a particular designated area. They aren't relieving on walks. They aren't relieving in socialization experiences out in public. It's only in certain designated areas, which is really important for them as guide dogs. Obviously, we can't have a guide in harness stopping to take a potty break. It's not something that we'd want.

I think one of the other really important things that our puppy raisers teach these dogs is socializing them out in public. They learn how to behave in a public setting, anywhere from in a quiet classroom to a really busy mall. I know some of our raiser take the pups on public transportation, or really big outings like downtown Disneyland. We take them all kinds of places to make sure that when they return to campus for formal training, they are best prepared as we can get them to be for guide work, breeding, or canine buddies.

Theresa Stern: The work that you all put into these puppies, it's really tremendous. Tell me about some other ways that Guide Dogs for the Blind really supports our puppy raising program.

Alex Gregory: I think Guide Dogs does an incredible job of supporting our volunteers throughout the puppy raising process, whether it be a challenging day or a good day. They also really support our volunteers by supplying veterinary financial assistance. They'll help cover the cost of vaccines, flea and heartworm preventative, emergency vet visits, spay and neuter costs. They also provide a lot of the supplies needed when you're puppy raising, their puppy jacket, collars, leashes, things of that nature. We have a lot of really lovely clubs that also support their raisers even further by supplying crates. Maybe they'll cover the cost of dog food, or socialization outings where the whole club goes and takes the puppies. There's a lot of opportunities there for financial support for someone who might be interested in puppy raising.

Theresa Stern: I get this question all the time, and I'm not a puppy raiser. People always ask this, and I'm sure, Mary, you've gotten this question before. How hard is it, or how does it feel when it's time to bring that puppy you've put so much love and work into, and bringing them back to Guide Dogs for formal training? That's got to be lots of emotions going on there. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Mary Clark: It's bittersweet for sure. I cry a lot, which means I probably won't even get through this without... I have one that is going to probably be going back in the next few months, and she's going to be a really hard one to lose. It is incredibly hard, and we do shed a lot of tears. I shed as many tears when I tell the happy stories about the lives that these puppies change. When I talk to people who have gotten them as a guide dog, and the way that they have changed their lives, sometimes they go on. I have one of the pups I raised that became a medic alert dog for a Type 1 diabetic. She says, "This dog gave me my life back again." I cry all over again. People will ask all the time, "How can you part with these pups?" I think, "How can we not?" They make such a difference.

Theresa Stern: Do you still keep in touch with some of the people who have your dogs, Mary?

Mary Clark: Absolutely. I have been really fortunate, and most everybody who's been the recipient of one of the dogs that I have raised have elected to keep in touch. It's extended family. My family keeps growing and growing. I have pups all over the place, and I get to hear about their escapades, and their partners, or whatever service they're providing. It's been a really, incredibly enriching experience.

Theresa Stern: Now, this question is for either one of you, or for both of you, should you feel inclined? What surprised you the most once you got to know Guide Dogs, and really got involved? Having heard about it before, and then actually being involved with it? Alex, can we start with you?

Alex Gregory: Yeah, that is a really good question. Going into it, I knew, "I'm going to work with really cute puppies." How can that be a bad job? I don't know. What really, truly surprised me when I started working for Guide Dogs for the Blind was how incredible our volunteers are. The amount of selfless love, time, commitment that they put into each and every puppy. Even the volunteers who aren't a puppy raiser, our Puppy Club volunteers, our Puppy Club leaders. Everyone has such an important role within puppy raising and developing these incredible dogs. It's not easy, but it's a lot of fun. Honestly, I've built relationships with people in this position, and I'm happy to call plenty of club leaders my friends. They're really lovely people, and it's warm and fuzzy, just like the puppies.

Theresa Stern: How about you, Mary?

Mary Clark: That was one of the things that surprised me so much, early on, when I was puppy raising is how much of the people around me got vested into the puppy I was raising. I knew I signed up for it, and how hard it would be for me to give the puppy back. I signed up for it so that's my own fault. Then, all of a sudden,

my family, my friends, my colleagues, they were, "You're what? You have to give your puppy back." I had to have going away parties for the puppy. It was interesting to me how much, outside, also gets vested in these puppies.

Theresa Stern: That's a really poignant point, in that it does. Our mission, at Guide Dogs for the Blind, it touches so many people, like you said, who even are maybe on the periphery a little bit. I'm sure they're all rooting for your puppies to make it as guides. It's sad they're leaving, but rooting for them, and then excited to hear what happens. I think that's what's really special about GDB. Mary, we've talked a lot about guide dogs, your puppies that have grown up to be guide dogs. We've mentioned our canine buddy program, and I believe your puppy raising club has some canine buddies in your club. Can you talk a little bit about the canine buddy program, and that relationship?

Mary Clark: Sure. A little bit. Maybe four years ago, a family was recommended to our club to come, and check out how puppies are raised. They were considering getting a canine buddy for their daughter who was visually impaired. They started coming to our club. The first time I met this family, the little girl, I think she was seven, she was hiding behind her mother's skirt. They came, and they met a new puppy. She barely would touch the puppy. Now, her sister really wanted this dog for her. Her sister more than the little one, but anyways, they started coming to our group. About a year later, or so, or maybe, I don't know how much time later, they actually were paired with a canine buddy. To see the difference in the development of this child was just amazing.

In a year's time, she would be introducing her canine buddy, saying it was her face, her best friend, that he kept her safe. She would come to meetings, and pet other dogs. It was an amazing relationship, to see how that developed. That was really, really fun. We've actually been lucky. Alex has placed, I think, two more other canine buddies in our area so that we have other families come. The one family, the older daughter finally talked her mom into raising one of the puppy for the blind. Yep, a guide dog puppy for the blind. They raised a puppy last year, and they do lots of puppy sitting for us. The other family offers their home for us to have meetings in their backyard. It's really been a wonderful community of puppy raisers, along with canine buddies, and the symbiotic relationship that we all have with each other is really cool.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. It sounds like. These canine buddies, actually, are part of our dog population. They are matched with children who are visually impaired, or blind, as kind of a pet dog, but also to help with socialization, and giving them some skills of daily living. Taking care of another animal, I think, could be really empowering. It sounds like it was very empowering for the young lady you talked about. That she really came out of her shell when she had this relationship with a canine buddy. That's an amazing success story. Thank you.

Alex, can you tell us a little bit about... If somebody's listening, who might be interested in getting involved in this program... I would think listening to this

would make people be really interested. Can you tell people how they might get involved?

Alex Gregory: Absolutely. We are always looking for more puppy raising volunteers. We do have puppy raising in the 10 Western states. There's a lot of opportunity to get involved with the Puppy Raising Club. It depends on what role a puppy volunteer is interested in participating in. We have a lot of options, which is great. Yeah. Depending on what role you're interested in joining, you have choices. We have puppy raisers. Those individuals who raise the puppies. You can do that full time, or you can co-raise with one, or more, other puppy raising families. You could also do puppy sitting. Let's say you're not able to take on the commitment of full-time puppy raising, or co-raising, and you're willing to do a puppy sit here and there. We always need puppy sitters. Someone who's willing and able to take puppies randomly and, or proof out behaviors. That's always really helpful, too. We have Puppy Club volunteers also. They don't necessarily take puppies home, but they might be responsible for helping create an outing for the Puppy Club, a really great socialization experience for the puppies, or making contact with people who are interested in raising.

There's a lot of opportunities there, and you can definitely find more on our website. If you go to [www.guidedogs.com/puppy](http://www.guidedogs.com/puppy), that is how you can get to more info on the puppy raising program.

Theresa Stern: These puppy raisers... How many of them do we have, Alex? We have a bunch across the Western states. Couple thousand, right?

Alex Gregory: In puppy raising, we have about 3,000 volunteers. They might be responsible for puppy raising, or puppy sitting, or Puppy Club leaders. A lot of people are involved in getting these puppies ready for guide work, or canine buddies, or breeders.

Theresa Stern: In a good year, there's no way we could do any of the things that we do, at Guide Dogs for the Blind, without these incredible volunteers. I think the last two years have shown us. We say that puppies are angels, but these people are really angels on earth. They're angels with a little dog bait bag on their waist, with the cookies in them. They're really heroes. Thank you, Alex, for leading them through this. Thank you, Mary, as well, in your role as a volunteer, and a volunteer leader in puppy raising, and the 10 puppies that you've raised so far. Want to send heartfelt thanks from me, from all of Guide Dogs for the Blind, and all of our clients. Thank you so much.

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