

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

Welcome to Central Bark. Today, we have something a little different. We're going to switch it up a bit. We're going to turn the mic over to two ladies from our Guide Dogs for the Blind community who are advocating for access, inclusion, and disability rights. TikTok has become the fastest growing social network over the last several years, and it's not just for dancing and makeup tutorials. It's actually become a really amazing forum for folks to rally support for special and important issues.

Ava Vaso and Gabriella Drago are two GDB graduates who, between the two of them, have a TikTok audience of over a quarter of a million people who tune in to view their videos that dispel myths and misconceptions about blindness and disabilities. They also share details about guide dog mobility, along with their own humor, style and fun. Hear from them about what it means to use this platform to create a more inclusive world.

Gabriella Drago...: My name is Gabriella Drago, and I live in the Cleveland, Ohio area. I got my guide dog Freesia from Guide Dogs for the Blind in spring of 2015, and she has been an amazing partner since. We've gone through college together and an internship. We moved all the way to Columbus, Ohio, and back to Cleveland for jobs, and she has been so resilient through all of that. Currently, we have a day job where we work at an agency for the blind, and we are able to be a part of the experiences of other blind individuals and help them on their journey. And I also am on TikTok as Key of Can't See, and she and I share our story and our life with other people. And it has honestly been amazing to be able to educate people and share our partnership and share what it's like to live in a sighted world as a blind person.

Having the social media platform have, has meant several things to me. The first is that it has given me confidence. And not only that, but it holds me accountable. So I am gaining confidence in that what I have to share really is important. The advocacy that needs to be done really does need to be done because I have people who comment on videos and who interact with the things that I'm posting by saying, "I didn't know that this was an issue," or "I didn't know that's how blind people did things," or "I didn't know that guide dogs had access to restaurants in the United States." People don't understand things, and the more I can do with my part in educating people and helping them learn that really there's so much work that needs to be done, the more I educate myself.

I've had to learn about so many things because I want to be careful when I'm posting things, because when I share it out to the world, it's out there. And so I make sure that I do my part. And when I'm educating on service animals, I'm reading the ADA law because I want to know that what I'm saying is 100% correct and that I'm not putting my own ideals into that video. So it has really

held me accountable and it has made me more confident in the things that I know and the things that I know need to be shared.

I think there is this misconception about guide dogs that a guide dog is like a magic wand and it will take somebody who is not able to navigate and doesn't have orientation and mobility skills and make them completely independent, that it will take them around town and get them to the coffee shop and get them out. And to some extent, yes, having a guide dog definitely forces you to get out more, but it does not make you have good orientation and mobility skills. And it's been really important for me to let people know when I post content with my guide dog, to convey that one must be able to navigate independently before getting a guide dog, before being able to be a successful guide team. And it's not like a magic wand. It is a bond that takes time to build and create. And it has been super important for me to emphasize that to people, that you have to have those orientation and mobility skills.

And I really would like to explain and go into detail for people about what that truly means and then to continue to explain that even after one gets a guide dog, you are constantly working and learning together. There are times that Freesia still makes mistakes and she's eight years old. And it's really important that I correct those mistakes because just like humans, we make mistakes, too. And a guide dog, isn't a magic wand. It's just an animal, just like we are humans. And I have to be able to be confident as a handler in order for my guide dog to be confident as well. And that's something that I think is not quite understood yet by the public, and I really hope to continue educating people on that.

Something that has surprised me about having the audience that I have on social media has been the kindness and support from strangers, people who genuinely want to see not only my success and my guide dog's success, but they want to learn about the blindness community and they want to learn about the capabilities of blind people. There are so many people who don't know that blind people are able to be independent because they've had no interaction with it. They've not seen representation in the media. They don't have family or friends who are blind, and they genuinely want to learn and want to be better advocates themselves. And I've just received so much support and kind words from these humans that I have never met before. And it really has been surprising to me and it has restored my faith in humanity a little bit.

Ava: Hi, I'm Ava and I'm a visually impaired 17 year old, and I'm also the girl who runs the Ava and Cheddar accounts on TikTok and Instagram. I also happen to be a senior in high school who's almost done and almost graduated, but you best believe that I'm not going to walk across that graduation stage alone. I'm about ready to walk across it with my guide dog, Cheddar. Cheddar is a two and a half year old yellow lab guide dog who I received back in July of 2021 when I went out to California to get him. He also happens to be sitting right on top of me right now, because he has absolutely no concept of personal space, but I will never complain about that because I love it. Now, when I got Cheddar around

seven months ago, before I even knew I had Cheddar, I fully intended to have an Instagram page for my dog, just to photo dump, because I take way too many pictures.

Now, alongside this Instagram that I would so graciously used to photo dump pictures of my dog, I also had a TikTok, but I had just never really planned on using it for anything. But I slowly started posting more and more. It just started off as just cute little short clips of Cheddar. And then those eventually got deleted because I got self-conscious. And then I started making educational content because I was like, "Hey, I have a guide dog and a lot of people may not know what that is or may not know about blindness and its spectrum, so why don't I try to make videos?" Because I've seen previous creators on TikTok make videos like this and I was kind of looking at this community and I was like, "This is an awesome community. I want to be a part of it and I want to see if I could ..."

Can you guys hear that? Hold on. Thank you, Cheddar. I saw the community and I was like, "I really want to join this. They look awesome. Blind Talk looks awesome. Guide Dog TikTok looks awesome." I've just always had this super strong urge to just answer questions and educate as much as people want. I was always the designated person to like, if you have a weird question about albinism or if you have a weird question about being blind in any sort, go ask Ava because she'll answer it for you as long as it's appropriate. And I was and I still am because I genuinely love answering people's questions. I love giving people the opportunity to ask whatever they want to because I adore answering questions. I love it. It's so fun. And I love creating connections and relationships through these questions. And I just love the whole process of it. It's so fun.

And that's when I realized I was like, TikTok could be a very good place for this. There's some negatives to TikTok, of course. But there's some negatives to every social media platform, unfortunately. But I thought TikTok could be a great place for this kind of content. And alongside Instagram, which I do use occasionally for educational stuff, it's more or less just, here's a really cute picture of Cheddar that I took in the middle of my marketing class that I probably should have been listening in. Yeah, you get my drift. It just, it means so much to me how this platform that Cheddar and I have created has reached so many people and even inspired some people to get a guide dog or finally start using their cane or come to terms with how blindness isn't a bad thing. It's just misrepresented. And so many other things that just means so much to me that Cheddar and I have been able to reach this many people.

I get asked questions word for word all the time that are like, "If you're blind, why do you need an education? Why are you going to school if you can't see." And then of course I respond back, "Hey, blindness is a spectrum and everybody deserves an education." And they're like, "If you can see, then you're not blind, so you're faking." That's when I check out of the conversation and I'm like, "This isn't worth fighting over. This person obviously just wants to egg it on." So social

media is an interesting place that you kind of have to learn to read and navigate through. It's what I've learned through having a larger platform.

But of course, alongside this kind of weird and quirky comments that you get sometimes, you always get those very genuine, "Hey, I'm a cane user who's looking into getting a guide dog," or "I'm a parent of a visually impaired child and I really want to look into guide dogs for my child and the future." And I will always answer those questions, but I will always start it off with having a guide dog is like having a very intelligent two year old child with you at all times. That phrase was drilled into me by my TVI, who also has a guide dog from Guide Dogs for the Blind. She's actually had her dog for around five years now. And little 14 year old me when she told me that I was like, That can't be that true." No, Ava, it's 17 year old Ava's going to sit here and tell you that it is very true. They are very intelligent two year olds, very, very intelligent. And they're 100% worth the work, it's just more work than a lot of people think it would be. It is a thousand percent worth it. Oh my gosh. But shout out to my TVI, because I didn't listen to her at first and now I understand it.

As you can tell, there's just so many funky little myths and stereotypes people have about blindness and guide dogs and such. And I always try to answer them and have conversations with these people about them. And it's just, you get some interesting ones. Social media is definitely an interesting place. And I think because social media is this weird little quirky place, the ability to build these very tight knit communities within itself is awesome because I have built so many relationships out of these communities. We have this large group chat full of like 12 people. We're all teenage guide dog handlers and we share our experience and is, and we send written pictures of our dogs throughout the school days, stuff like that.

And I also have another group chat full of the three other girls that I went to Guide Dogs with back in July of 2021. We still talk all day. And it was really cool because we all found each other on social media and talked before we even went there. So we kind of had a friendship already when we went into this, getting our dogs, and there's so many cool opportunities with it. And I just want to thank everybody who has helped Cheddar and I be able to build this platform and be able to answer questions and do things because we definitely could not have done it without everybody who follows us and supports us, so thank you so much.

Theresa Stern: For more information about guide dogs for the blind, please visit guidedogs.com.