

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

Well, hello everyone. And welcome to Central Bark. This is our very first episode. And today, we are celebrating 80 years of Guide Dogs For the Blind and looking to our future as well. And today, our very special guest is Christine Beninger, who is president and CEO of Guide Dogs For the Blind. Welcome, Chris.

Christine Benin...: Oh, thank you, Theresa. I am so thrilled to be here today and particularly since this is our inaugural Central Bark podcast. So thank you for having me.

Teresa Stern: Oh, my gosh. Absolutely. Thank you for joining us. Chris, tell us a little bit about Guide Dogs For the Blind, the mission and the vision and what we do and all that good stuff.

Christine Benin...: I think one of the things that speaks so highly to our mission is that we are celebrating our 80th year, which means that the mission for Guide Dogs For the Blind is one that certainly resonates and it is evergreen. So our mission really is to provide independence to individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Part of that mission of independence also involves inclusion and we execute our mission through the use of a well trained guide dog, all of whom are absolutely amazing.

Teresa Stern: Yes, I can attest to that having four of them.

Christine Benin...: Yes you can. Yes, you can. Mr. Wills, who I can see by your side right now.

Teresa Stern: Yes. Yes. That is an amazing mission. And like you said, for 80 years, it's really shown that we've been able to remain relevant and help folks out as much as we can over time, which I think that resilience is not common in business of any kind, right Chris?

Christine Benin...: It's not, it's not. There's very, very few organizations, nonprofit or for-profit organizations that have been in business for 80 years. So it truly is something to celebrate.

Teresa Stern: Yes. Well, we know you haven't been here for 80 years, but you've been here for about eight, right?

Christine Benin...: That's right. That's right. I'm old, but I'm not quite that old.

Teresa Stern: Exactly. Exactly.

Christine Benin...: Thank you.

Teresa Stern: So tell us about your journey to Guide Dogs. I think it's a really interesting story, how you came to us and we have to say that we're really very lucky to have you.

Christine Benin...: You're very kind Theresa. I am so honored to be part of the Guide Dogs team. I really am. My journey to Guide Dogs is a bit circuitous. I started in the for-profit world. I started actually as an auditor, believe it or not.

Teresa Stern: Wow. That's definitely different. Yeah.

Christine Benin...: It is. Yeah. I did that for three years and realized that is not my path for the future.

Teresa Stern: Not the passion, right?

Christine Benin...: Yeah. Right, right. Went back, got an MBA, went to work for Hewlett Packard for 15 years. I really enjoyed working at Hewlett Packard. I had the opportunity actually to work in Europe for three years, as part of my work with HP. I managed three different manufacturing divisions. I was very lucky with my career there. And then I took a complete left turn. I went to work for Humane Society Silicon Valley for 17 years. And when I started at the humane society, we were taking in 55,000 animals a year and euthanizing 35,000 of those animals. So not a great place to work from that standpoint.

Teresa Stern: Right. Right.

Christine Benin...: But I had a wonderful team there. And over the 17 years, we were able to reduce pet over population from 55,000 animals down to less than 20, and euthanasia from 35,000 down to less than 500.

Teresa Stern: That's easier. Yes.

Christine Benin...: And we built a new facility in the process. So I'm proud of the work that we were able to do there. And I retired from the humane society. And after a couple of years, I realized that I really miss being part of a team focused on good. And one of the things that always made a... I shouldn't say a big difference. Yes. It made a difference, but I was always in awe of as the human animal bond and the power of that.

Teresa Stern: Yes.

Christine Benin...: And the Guide Dogs For the Blind has the human animal bond on steroids.

Teresa Stern: Yes, we do. Yes.

Christine Benin...: So I am very, very honored to be part of this team.

Teresa Stern: Like I said, we're so lucky to have you here. And I think one of the great perspectives, and I think it has to do with that sort of human animal bond that you feel so much and that you've had in your life over the years, but that you really brought to Guide Dogs was this of philosophy of both sides of the harness. And can you tell our listeners a little bit about what that means to you and in terms of Guide Dogs For the Blind?

Christine Benin...: Yes. I think one of the, I'm not going to say myths, but so often people focus just on the dogs. Right? And our dogs are amazing. I mean, absolutely. And pretty darn cute.

Teresa Stern: Yes. Yes.

Christine Benin...: But the mission is so much more than that. And I think what's so inspirational to me is seeing the team. It's our client and their guide dog and what they accomplished together and seeing the team really work seamlessly together. And the difference that the team makes, not just the dog, not just the client, but the difference that the team makes within their family, within their neighborhood, within their workplace. And so, that is what both sides of the harness represent to me because that's the essence of our mission. Right? It's what happens when you connect that person with that dog through the harness.

Teresa Stern: Right. So that magic spark right there.

Christine Benin...: That magic spark. Absolutely. Yes.

Teresa Stern: So having come to Guide Dogs, about eight years ago, I think there's a lot of people have preconceptions about Guide Dogs For the Blind, or just like anywhere new that you work, what did you find most surprising about Guide Dogs For the Blind in our community?

Christine Benin...: That's such a great question. And I've been interviewed a gazillion times and nobody's ever asked me that.

Teresa Stern: A surprise question.

Christine Benin...: Yeah. Kudos to you, Ms. Teresa. When I think about what surprised me and I will say surprised and delighted me, because I'd never really seen it before anywhere else is how the entire organization, the entire staff,, all of our volunteers, our donors really, really are committed to the mission. Really believe in it, are committed of the mission, will do anything to ensure that the mission moves forward and we do the best job possible. No one looks at it just as a job. People really believe in the mission of the organization. And I've never really seen that before in any organization, not to the extent that we see it at Guide Dogs.

Teresa Stern: Yeah.

Christine Benin...: To me, that's the secret sauce.

Teresa Stern: I love that. The secret sauce. I love it. I love it. We're hoping it's low calorie and gluten free, but yes. So gosh, can you tell us a little bit, we're sort of looking back and celebrating all the amazing work we've done for the last 80 years. I think we've graduated over 16,000 teams or something crazy like that.

Christine Benin...: Unbelievable. Just amazing.

Teresa Stern: Unbelievable. What do you see in the future for Guide Dogs? What are some of the programs and services you're excited about?

Christine Benin...: I'm very, very excited with the path that we have outlined for ourselves for the next 80 years. And as you know, Teresa, because you've been part of the executive team. We've worked on our strategic framework. Our board has helped us and endorsed a plan to really expand our services and really look at how we can serve our clients over their entire life and in different ways because all of our needs change over time.

And that's an expansion into youth services. It's an expansion into orientation mobility services. For those people who either need a tuneup or individuals who don't yet have the level of O&M in order to utilize a guide dog, it means how do we serve our clients when the traditional guide dog is no longer the right solution for them? And how do we advocate for our clients?

Teresa Stern: Yeah. That's a huge one right now. Isn't it?

Christine Benin...: It is a huge one because I think that the visually impaired community, it's not the largest and so it can easily get overlooked. And you know, we've seen that actually with the plethora of, let's say, fake service dogs, right?

Teresa Stern: Yes.

Christine Benin...: And the impact that that has on our client's abilities to be able to travel safely.

Teresa Stern: Right. Right. Can you speak a little bit about how that impacts those of us who use a guide dog for travel?

Christine Benin...: Oh, you know this better than I, but yes. How many times have we been in airports, right? Where you see people getting on a plane. They have a dog that has a jacket on it that says service dog and it's cowering in the corner. It's clearly not comfortable in the environment that they've been placed in. And oftentimes when particularly dogs are in environments like that, they will lash out in fear. Right?

Teresa Stern: Ah, yes.

Christine Benin...: And so we've had many, many clients whose guide dogs have been attacked, whether that's on a plane, whether that's in a store. Unfortunately when that does happen to a guide dog, that can break their confidence. And that means that they don't have the confidence to guide and have to be retired. I mean, that's tragic when that happens.

Teresa Stern: Definitely a devastating consequence and something so easy for folks just to not take their dogs where they're not socialized to be not, not fraudulently pose as a person with a disability with a service animal. It is so devastating for so many people when things go awry.

Christine Benin...: It is, it is. I think oftentimes people who do don't really understand the impact that it can have. I mean, we all want our dogs with us. We all love our dogs. Hopefully through education, and actually now there's laws being put in place that people will not try and get around the system and think about whether it makes sense for them to be bringing a dog into an environment that it hasn't been trained for.

Teresa Stern: Exactly. Exactly. So, gosh, I hate to bring this up because it's such a bummer of a subject, but it's been a hard couple last years have been really hard with the whole COVID pandemic. But I have to say I'm super proud of Guide Dogs For the Blind in that we have continued our mission. Can you talk a little bit about just about that experience of leading an organization through these crazy changing times?

Christine Benin...: Well, I am going to echo your comment about being extremely proud of Guide Dogs. And I am, because we are an essential business. We have had to operate throughout the pandemic. That hasn't been easy with lockdowns, with having to change protocols in order to ensure safety, managing the fear that all of us have about COVID and how it spreads and whether I've got it or not. All of those sorts of things. It's been a roller coaster over the last two years and continues to be unfortunately, but through all of that, that's where I do believe that "the secret sauce" of Guide Dogs has really come through. That our staff or volunteers have showed up. They have been there to support the mission and we've certainly had to change how we do things, but we're still training.

We've been able to train dogs, we've been able to train clients. The mission is moving forward. It looks a little different, but it's moving forward. And I'm very, very proud about that.

Teresa Stern: Yeah, you should be. That's just been, I think, difficult for the whole community. Everything changes every day and-

Christine Benin...: It does. It does. Oh, good lord.

Teresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So that is awesome. So Chris, tell us a little bit about what you like to do when you're not all about Guide Dogs For the Blinds. And what about your special four legged friends at home.

Christine Benin...: Oh, thank you for asking. So I share my home with right now, two four leggeds. I have a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful six year old golden retriever from Guide Dogs For the Blind. Her name is Thea. She was going to be a breeder. She's perfect in every way. But unfortunately, her hips aren't quite perfect.

Teresa Stern: Ah, my hips aren't quite perfect either.

Christine Benin...: Yeah, neither am I. So she's an official ambassador for Guide Dogs and she actually probably loves that job even better because she big flirt and I have a little 13 year old rescue Chihuahua. His name is PD and PD and the absolutely adore each other. And some exciting news. In March I will be getting a little basset hound puppy.

Teresa Stern: You are not.

Christine Benin...: I am.

Teresa Stern: Oh my gosh, I'm so excited. Oh, my gosh.

Christine Benin...: I am too.

Teresa Stern: This is brand new news.

Christine Benin...: It is.

Teresa Stern: A puppy.

Christine Benin...: Because as you know, I lost my Hank in October.

Teresa Stern: Love Hank. Yes.

Christine Benin...: My basset hound. Anyways, it was the circuitous route to actually get to this puppy. But anyways, a litter was born on January 3rd and I am going to be getting a little puppy in March.

Teresa Stern: Oh, my gosh. I can't wait. That's so awesome. That is awesome news. Oh my gosh. Well, as we wrap up for today, I just thought it might be kind of fun to sort of look the future as though we could like magic mirror or something and just kind of wondering what do you envision for guide dogs? What might have changed? What might be the same in 80 years from now?

Christine Benin...: Oh, my goodness. Well, first and foremost, I absolutely believe that Guide Dogs For the Blind will be here in 80 years.

Teresa Stern: Yes.

Christine Benin...: I won't be here in 80 years, but Guide Dogs For the Blind definitely will be here in 80 years. I do believe, oftentimes people talk about the fact that with technology today, is that ever going to make the guide dog obsolete? And fundamentally I don't believe it will because while technology certainly can help with safe travel, technology can't be that confidence builder, that companion, that best friend, that soulmate. And I really believe that particularly in the world of technology, we need more of that love.

Teresa Stern: Yes.

Christine Benin...: Because we certainly don't get it from our computers.

Teresa Stern: No, no, you can't cuddle up with your iPhone.

Christine Benin...: We can't. No, but I do think as we have been doing, that Guide Dogs will continue to really look at what are the best ways that we can serve our clients? And mold and shape ourselves in order to be, as you said, relevant, continue to be relevant to the needs of our clients and shape ourselves accordingly. So I have high hopes for the organization over the next 80 years.

Teresa Stern: Yeah, me too. I'm excited to see as much of it as I will.

Christine Benin...: Yes. Yeah, me too. Me too.

Teresa Stern: Well, thank you so much, Chris, for joining us today in Central Bark. I hope everybody can join us for our next episode.

Christine Benin...: Thank you, Teresa. It's been a pleasure.

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