

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

Well, hello everyone, and welcome to this episode of Central Bark. Today, we are talking about our amazing veterinary services at Guide Dogs for the Blind. And joining me today is one of my personal heroes, because she so helped my guide dog when he was having some medical issues, is Alex Philippine. Dr. Alex Philippine is here. Welcome Alex.

Alex Philippine: Thank you. Thank you. It's such a play to be here. I really appreciate this.

Theresa Stern: Great. So Alex, tell us a little bit about your journey to guide dogs and did you always want to be a veterinarian, or kind of a little bit about the path that you took to come here.

Alex Philippine: Sure. Yeah. So I went to veterinary school at UC Davis. I graduated in 2014. I don't know that I would necessarily say I always knew I wanted to be a vet. But starting with fifth grade, I really wanted to pursue a medical career and I felt like people were just a little strange, perhaps a medical profession in the human world might be a little much for me. I felt like help helping animals and working with animals might be better for me, a bit of a better suit. So I went ahead and actually I went to Davis undergrad as well, thinking that I could just shoe my way into the vet school. It was that much closer to UC Davis because it was in the same town. So then I went to vet school, graduated like I said in 2014. I then pursued a rotating internship in Walnut Creek where I learned more about internal medicine, surgery, oncology, neurology, kind of the general rotations that you typically do so you learn a bit more about what it's actually like to be a doctor.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Alex Philippine: And then I went into private practice after that.

Theresa Stern: Oh, very cool.

Alex Philippine: Yeah. As of June, 2015, I was a fully cooked veterinarian, fully cooked doctor where I could actually do something and make a difference. So I actually took a job in Los Altos at a wonderful place. It was in private practice. I was there for just a little bit over four years and I really liked it. It was a great job. I learned a ton and my colleagues were amazing. Our clientele was great, but I felt like maybe something was still maybe missing a little bit in terms of my career goals and just more that mission. I wanted to have a little bit more helping, not just the dogs and the cats and everything, but just the humans as well as a team.

And I actually was contemplating maybe potentially leaving my job for something else that had a greater calling. And then I actually found the posting for Guide Dogs for the Blind. They were opening up a job for one of the

veterinarians, which is very rare. Typically, GDB, jobs don't come up open very often here. It's quite infrequent to have a job opening. So it was kind of a kismet a little bit. So I was very excited. It seemed to come at a time when I needed something like that. So I decided to kind of sit on it. I was talking to my husband and I said, "You know what? I'm just going to think about this for a little bit and see how I feel." And then a month later I saw the posting again.

And so I remember talking to my husband and I said I remember saying maybe there's a reason this is coming up, no one's filled the position yet. Maybe I should just try it out, thinking that there's no way. I'm not going to move. I'm in the South Bay, this would be in the North Bay. I would have to sell my house and pick up and go. Right?

Theresa Stern: Yep.

Alex Philippine: So we decided to go for it, I applied and the rest is history. I sold my house, moved up here year. So I'm now in Marin. I think it was the right call for sure. And just having this organization, just working here is just so amazing, honestly. From the colleagues I have to the clients that we serve, as well as the population of amazing dogs that we have is just truly an honor to be here. And I can't really imagine ever leaving, honestly. So I'm very blessed I think, to have found this place, because not very many people can say that about their careers.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. I think we're the lucky ones, Alex. We need to figure out where that was posted, that it found you, so that we can make sure that we post again, if we ever need to.

Alex Philippine: Yeah. I kind of want to find that email again to frame it and say, "Sometimes fate has a way of holding your hand a little bit and perhaps things are meant to happen."

Theresa Stern: Yeah. I imagine in private practice, you were seeing more than just dogs. So now you're only seeing dogs. Do you miss the rats and ferrets and iguanas and things like that or it's all pretty?

Alex Philippine: To be honest, I only did work with cats and dogs.

Theresa Stern: Okay. Okay. Fair enough.

Alex Philippine: So I didn't do the exotics. I had colleagues who worked with them. I just wasn't quite as comfortable with that. So I was mostly working with cats and dogs. I do miss cats every once in a while. I do have a cat of my own. And so sometimes, I mock do physical exams on her when I feel like I have got a hankering to deal with her. But other than that, I think, I don't want to say lost because I don't feel like I've lost anything by having switched career moves. But what I don't get to do with cats anymore, I get to do so much more now with our dog population

and I get to wear with puppies and things that I wasn't really doing beforehand and with these moms their wellbeing. It's a different environment, but it's lovely in its own way. And every once in a while, if I really miss a cat, like I said, I can chase my cat around the house and I get my fix.

Theresa Stern: Sounds good. Because I don't think we're moving to guide cats any time soon, but we'll make sure that you'll always have a cat to practice with or whatever. So that's awesome. Yeah. So your experience in the veterinary world has been pretty robust, you've had lots of different places that you've worked. I'm wondering how the philosophy of veterinary care here at Guide Dogs for the Blind measures up with the way that other places look at that veterinary care?

Alex Philippine: Yeah, sure. We're probably going to go into this a little bit later when we're talking about the vet financial assistance program and everything. But I think the biggest difference between private practice and guide dogs is that here at Guide Dogs, we have this amazing luxury and luck that we have amazing donors, honestly, right? This is a nonprofit organization.

Theresa Stern: Yes we do.

Alex Philippine: And so basically we have this opportunity to care for our dogs from the moment they're born all the way to when they pass, which it's such an honor to be able to be part of that. At the same time, just being able to know that finances are never the reason why we should make certain choices in our dog's life. And it's also very different too, because in private practice, veterinary care has become much more expensive over the last couple years. Just even from when I graduated, things have become very, very pricey. And so very frequently, and when I was working in private practice, I was having to deal with this problem every day, where people were making choices based off of how much things cost and they were having to make really, really tough choices.

And at the same time, it's a different population as well. So it's not just the financial component too. But in private practice, these animals are pets.

Theresa Stern: Right.

Alex Philippine: Right. So at the end of the day, you're not expecting them to do anything that's beyond maybe cuddling with you, providing emotional support as well as of course, this human animal bond. But they're not actually doing a job. Whereas guide dogs, it's a totally different ballgame. These dogs actually have a purpose, they have a job, they're responsible for someone's life, someone's safety, someone's independence as well, someone's ability to actually interact with the public in a different way than they were before. And so there's a lot of responsibility that they carry on their wee little shoulders. So it's a very different world. And like I said, that was what attracted me to the job in the first place was because I felt like, "Gosh, I can actually provide veterinary care for these

amazing creatures that aren't just dogs." They have a job, they have this huge purpose.

Theresa Stern: So Alex, a few months ago, as you know, you and I got to work together on a very special case that's near and dear to my heart, when my guide dog, Wills, had some knee issues. And I think what really stood out to me was how much you really took that into consideration that this was a working dog rather than a pet dog, also very important. But that the expectations are different. And so when Wills started to limp and I brought him in, you took it very seriously, and we did some x-rays and looked at like, "Oh, it looks like there might be something going on there." And because Wills had a job, I think you really had to look at it in two ways. When you say what the decision would be for me, and if you want to talk a little bit about that.

Alex Philippine: Yeah, absolutely. And like you said, this goes right back to the fact that when you're working in private practice with pet dogs versus Guide Dogs for the Blind, with dogs with a purpose, with a job it's very different, right? So like you said, when Wills had a, like you said, ACL injury, it's called a cranial cruciate ligament tear. It's just a slightly different nomenclature in animals, but it's the same structure. And unfortunately, humans are a bit lucky in that when you blow your ACL as a human, you can actually undergo a surgery that replaces that ligament. We can't really do that with dogs. And so the surgical repair is a bit different, it's a bit more invasive. So when he actually had that injury, exactly like you said, we had a whole different conversation.

This conversation in private practice, would've gone, "Okay. How active is your dog? Okay, pretty active. What about if we try medical management with some pain medications and give him some time? Maybe this will kind of self heal, maybe they'll have a little bit less range of motion. But in terms of their quality of life, they're going to be all right and maybe we can forego this invasive surgery, but they'll be okay." Whereas you and I had a very different conversation. It was about, okay, well this has happened. So we need to do something about it. Sure, we can put him on pain medication for the time being, but we need to make a greater decision for his long term health and his function. And I distinctly remember having this conversation with you because I asked you, "You know him best. I am just a butterfly on your shoulder trying to look at the situation from a little bit further away, a more objective manner. But do you think he wants to work?"

And it was such a lovely conversation to have, because I remember you telling me, "Oh my gosh, he lives to guide."

Theresa Stern: Yes, he does. He does.

Alex Philippine: He's not done. He doesn't want to get retired for this and put on pain medications for months and months and then don't go to the beach and don't do your job. He wants to be able to actually do this work. So that, all of a

sudden, told me what I needed to know, that we need to do something that will actually fix him permanently and pursue surgery, even though it is a bit more invasive, it's a bit more of a recovery time. And then you and I started to talk about what that means, the recovery time, what this involves and everything else that followed up with that. So absolutely, this is a very different conversation to have when you have a dog with a job because you want be able to preserve that and you want to be able to preserve that in the best, most efficient, safe way for them so that they can go back to working.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that helped me so much in making the decision because what would Wills want? That's really what I wanted. I wanted whatever Wills wanted. And having me think about it, in those terms, really made the decision easier. I mean, it took me a couple days to decide, but because I knew how... I mean, he just loves it.

Alex Philippine: He loves to work, he really does. And once we got him back in that harness after his rehab, I remember thinking, "Gosh, this was absolutely the right idea, the right choice," because we put him back in that harness and he was dragging you down the hallway.

Theresa Stern: I know.

Alex Philippine: He was so excited.

Theresa Stern: I know. Now I need the knee surgery, right? Oh my gosh, he's fast. So I think that piece, you're working with a animal, but all also working with the person and you just had such great compassion and empathy, and I just want to thank you so much for that.

Alex Philippine: It was my pleasure and I'm so glad that obviously, things worked out. And one thing I was going to say is it wasn't just the two of us though, right? This was a specialty surgery.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Alex Philippine: That required help from outside. So going back to explore that for just a second. Yeah, we identified that he had a problem with his knee. We made the choice to go ahead and pursue surgery, but we don't do that surgery because it's a pretty specialized orthopedic procedure on campus and we don't have the means to do that. So then all of a sudden, you enter all these other people. And this is what's so lovely about Guide Dogs is that have the resources and the ability to actually work within the community to get the stuff that we need for our dogs.

So there's almost never a limit to what we can do because we have all these relationships around the environment around here. We've built such amazing rapport with all these different veterinary clinics around us. And so all it took for me is to have a chat my favorite orthopedic surgeon, get him on the surgery

books, get him his surgery that he needed and then do the rehab with you at home, we talked about that. And then when he needed his physical rehab work, we sent him off to Petaluma to get all of his underwater treadmill therapy.

Theresa Stern: Yes, with the fabulous Kristen Hagler. Yes.

Alex Philippine: Exactly. And so it was so nice because all these things, it's not just one person, one decision, it's a team effort. You're trying to take everything into account and none of the stuff is happening in a vacuum. You're going to have so many different people who are involved in this care and they all want the same thing. They all want the same outcome and purpose that this dog goes back to being able to guide and he's happy and he's pain free. And that's exactly what we got, which is amazing. But it required like 10 different people. Right?

Theresa Stern: I know, I know. It's funny, I've been doing the Central Bark, so I think this is our fifth episode. And in every episode, that's a thread that comes through all the things that we do here at Guide Dogs for the Blind, is that community, that working together for a purpose. And it's just so empower and we could do so much more working together. I love it. It's inspiring for me.

Alex Philippine: Absolutely, yeah.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. And I have to say you mentioned earlier the Veterinary Financial Assistance Program we have at guide Dogs for the blind, that was absolutely critical for me in that money didn't come into the decision for what was the best thing to do for Wills. It was really about what was right for Wills and what Wills would want. So do you want to talk a little bit about our Veterinary Financial Assistance Program?

Alex Philippine: Yeah. It's a really amazing program, honestly. Because I do come from the outside world and I've been here for about two years and three months, just about, it never ceases to amaze me just how well this place works, just being on donations only. It blows my mind a little bit because again, coming from the private practice world, I constantly have to remind myself that we're nonprofit. And this is all just based off of amazing individuals out there who want to help our mission and they're donating all these funds and resources for us to be able to use for these amazing dogs that absolutely deserve it. So the Vet Financial Assistance Program, is it's shortcut, VFA the short name for it, it starts from the day they're born truly. Once they leave campus and they go into puppy raising all these puppies that we breed, they go into puppy raising and any help or need medically that they have between then and when they come back to campus for training, the puppy raisers get to take advantage of this VFA program.

Such that exactly as you said, if there's a medical concern, any problem in the field, wherever they may be, they could be in Colorado, they can be in Washington, Texas, wherever they're actually being raised, no one has to worry about the fact that they need some medical assistance, right? And there's

always our veterinary staff, we're always on call 24/7, regardless of whether or not we've got office hours. And so if there's a problem overnight or over a weekend with a puppy in the field that needs vet assistance, we're able to provide that, to get them the best, fastest care that they actually need. And then once they're actually paired in a team with their human, then they graduate as an actual active guide. And that VFA program doesn't stop. It just keeps going. That's what's so lovely.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Alex Philippine: Is that these dogs go then into their future job in their home where they're actually going to be doing their thing. And if they need anything that requires vet assistance, gosh forbid they have a problem with literally anything. Say they have a ear infection, they've got their annual checkup, or something more worrisome, maybe they've got a growth somewhere that needs to be addressed or immediate surgery that was not expected. All these things that life can throw at you because that's what life does nowadays.

Theresa Stern: Yes, it does.

Alex Philippine: All these things, we get to actually provide the veterinary financial assistance all the way till they pass, which is truly, it's so humbling actually. When you really think about it, I can't really think of any other program that can do that or has been able to do that. So it's quite lovely.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, not even for people like.

Alex Philippine: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: I think about once when a guide dog retires, that VFA program stays with them as long as they stay with their grad or with a family member of the grad, and I always joke like, "They've got a really good retirement plan." They get benefits. That's awesome.

Alex Philippine: And they deserve it.

Theresa Stern: And they should.

Alex Philippine: They absolutely deserve it. These guys are working out there, they're making decisions for their team to be safe and supportive. I can't even imagine what their life is really. It's amazing, right?

Theresa Stern: It's amazing, yeah.

Alex Philippine: All we can do is part of the vet financial program and being a vet is to just help them along that path. I'm just one little cog in this pretty cool.

Theresa Stern: Help them meet their potential.

Alex Philippine: Exactly. Yeah, yeah.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. So Alex, I know that part of your time, you're spending in our amazing state-of-the-art puppy center with our moms and little ones. And I'm wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about the puppy center and how all the things work down there.

Alex Philippine: Sure, sure. The puppy center is pretty phenomenal and it's such a lovely way to start a life. If you think about it, especially when you're trying to set up these dogs for success and to become a future guide, what a lovely way to enter the world. It's an amazing place. It's beautiful. You go in there, it's super clean, very nice and warm and dry. It's a very calm environment. Every time I go through, there's a whole bunch of socialization things happening. There's the neonatal team is amazing. And so they're playing all these sounds and vacuum cleaners and cats meowing and all sorts of little things on sound making machines, just so that way the puppies get socialized to these various things. And it's amazing. Such a clever way of actually getting these guys introduced to the real world outside.

And the place is huge. The first couple of times I went in there, I was joking with one of my colleagues that I should put my Fitbit back on so I could just count the number of steps I'm going through from one side to the next. But it's really nice because we can have a lot of dogs there and we can space them if there's any concerns between them, so that way they have their own little private suite. The moms seem really happy when they go in. It's almost like a little spa for them.

I don't know the details of how this puppy center, how exactly it evolved and how it came about that this was built, but it's obviously a huge effort, team effort. Lots of donations have to go through that. So we're super appreciative because it's a lot of work that has gone in to create that space. And how amazing, how grateful we are for having that because it's truly spectacular. Again, looking back at it, I always get humbled by the fact that we have such amazing people that want to support our mission and I feel like we're really super lucky, honestly. So it's a super cool place.

Theresa Stern: Another way that I think you guys are doing this, that I just recently learned about and it's really interesting to me, when you're visiting, because I know people out there who are listening who have pets, know how sometimes our pets know we're driving to the veterinarian and they're not loving it. But you've this whole fear free system, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

Alex Philippine: Yeah. This was like a whole campaign. I think about maybe last year, the vet team, the entire veterinary clinic, made the decision to have all of us be fear

free certified. So from our practice manager to our veterinary medical director, to all of the vets, all of the vet technicians, vet assistants, the client service representatives, literally the entire vet clinic, no joke, we're all fear free certified. Because we actually want and believe in that message. Our dogs, again, going back to their job, they have to be able to do this with immense confidence.

And one of the things that I used to see in private practice all the time is that no one had time ever for anything. So if you brought a scared dog into the clinic and you had to do X, Y, Z on them, you did X, Y, Z, no matter what that dog was feeling. So if that meant holding them down or doing some and things that were maybe a little bit too fast, a little bit not quite what the dog intended, we kind of just got it done. And I will say, full disclaimer here, a lot of clinics have actually moved away from that because I think we're all realizing globally that this is not okay and that we need to get our approval from our dogs as well, from our patients.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. It's a partnership. Right?

Alex Philippine: Exactly. But I think it's pretty hard in private practice to have the entire clinic fear free certified, right?

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Alex Philippine: So the fact that we all bought into this message and we're all trying to do the right thing here and really actually get these dogs to be as comfortable as humanly possible and dog possible in our clinic, they see the clinic and they actually like it.

Theresa Stern: Oh yeah. Wills will take me right there, yeah.

Alex Philippine: Because they know good things happen in there and we want it to be like. Once these guys graduate, they're not necessarily always going to be seen by us depending on whether, if they're closer to us, then maybe yeah. Maybe they will come back to us for veterinary care just because their clients may want to pursue that with us because they're closer. But if they go somewhere out of state, they're going to go to a different clinic altogether. So having this baseline confidence for each and every dog that goes out there to then be able to go into a completely different vet clinic and still be okay and still be confident enough to go in there, get their treatment, not lose their little mind, and then go back and be able to guide efficiently and safely for their client, that's all you want. You don't want them to be shaking like a little leaf. You want them to be happy because in the end you're just trying to provide healthcare for them. Right?

Theresa Stern: Yep.

Alex Philippine: And I think one of the challenges with veterinary medicine is, gosh, human medicine, you could just tell someone what you're doing, right?

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Alex Philippine: So you can just tell them, ask them how are you feeling, try to relay their fears. It's a conversation right there and there. We don't get to do that with our dogs. We just get to interpret their body language. We just try our best to be the best advocates we can be for these dogs that don't actually have a voice on their own. So it's such a nice, compassionate way of being patient and having respect and giving them the care that they need. And truly, I feel like this whole fear free movement should have happened many, many decades ago. Better late than never.

Theresa Stern: I know. I know. But like you said, it just makes it so much more pleasant for everybody involved, right?

Alex Philippine: Yeah, yeah.

Theresa Stern: The dog's happy, vet's happy, the person's happy.

Alex Philippine: Yeah. And you're building trust. And the whole point is that you're actually building that human animal bond. If they trust you, they'll work for you. If they trust you, they actually want to do the things you're asking them to do. And that's truly what it comes down to. You want them to be happy and healthy.

Theresa Stern: Yes, yes. All of that there. Speaking of happy and healthy, if you had any advice for somebody who might be listening, whether they have a guide dog or a pet dog at home, or a hamster or whatever, what would be your best advice or someone who loves their fur baby and wants to have a long life with them?

Alex Philippine: I think having a partnership with the veterinary team is crucial because that's truly where all the healthcare is going to be coming from as well. Having good rapport with a vet clinic somewhere, someone that works the way your mind works, having a back and forth conversation, I think is really important. All of us have a different way of doing things. So you may have to go through a series of different vets or different people to find your niche, find the best place for you, because each person can be very different. But being able to actually have this honest, two-way road conversation with your veterinary care team, I think, is crucial. Because truly, when that pet or working dog or what have you gets sick, that's who's going to be coming in to help you.

And then having some fun, too. I think sometimes we focus on, I know I'm guilty of this too even with my pets, I don't have a working dog obviously. But actually have a career changed dog from here.

Theresa Stern: Oh you do.

Alex Philippine: And sometimes I get a little bit on her case about not doing things the way I want and sometimes, you just have to step back and say, "Okay, hang on. Is she having a good time?"

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Alex Philippine: Is she healthy? Okay. She being silly, total doofus? Yes. Okay. You know what? Let's just let this one slide, it's okay, it's not the end of the world. And just realize that tomorrow is another day. You can try again, see if that works better.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Totally.

Alex Philippine: Give yourself a little opportunity to maybe just not be perfect all the time. I think especially nowadays, with everything that's going on in this world, I think it's super important to give yourself a little bit of a break, a little bit of grace. Be kind to either your pets, your family, yourself and just know that it's going to be okay, you just need to breathe it out.

Theresa Stern: I love it.

Alex Philippine: Sometimes that's all you need.

Theresa Stern: Exactly. Exactly. Like fear free for life, let's all dive in.

Alex Philippine: Exactly. Positive reinforcement works very well for humans, as well as for pets.

Theresa Stern: Yes, yes, yes.

Alex Philippine: Implement that as often as you can.

Theresa Stern: Well, Alex, thank you so much for what you do for Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Alex Philippine: Thank you. You're so sweet.

Theresa Stern: Thank you personally for what you've done for me and for my Wills. And thanks for joining us on Central Bark.

Alex Philippine: Absolutely. Thank you so much. It was lovely. It was very nice chatting with you.

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