

Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Theresa Stern, and I'm your host. Hello, and welcome to Central Bark. Today, we have the extreme pleasure of talking with Jane Flower, who is our Youth Outreach Specialist at Guide Dogs for the Blind. And we're going to be exploring some of the new programs and services available to teens and youth who are visually impaired. Welcome, Jane. Welcome to Central Bark.

Jane Flower: Hey, Theresa. Thank you. So excited to be here. I love the new podcast.

Theresa Stern: Awesome. For those of you who don't really know Jane or me very well, Jane and I have known each other for many, many years, and I have to say that Jane is probably the number one influencer for me in getting my first guide dog. I won't even say how many decades ago that was. But I want to thank you, Jane, because your role modeling really changed my life. So thank you.

Jane Flower: Oh, well, it was actually my dog. I think she was the one, Ari, who-

Theresa Stern: Yeah, she was amazing. So as you know now, Jane is obviously a client of GDB as well as a staff member. Jane has had three guide dogs from Guide Dogs for the Blind. And Jane, I think it would be just fun for everybody to hear a little bit about what made you decide to get a guide dog.

Jane Flower: I think, yeah, I was back in my early 20s and just in that early phase of having had vision loss my whole life and just grappling with that place where my vision was deteriorating. And I knew it was time to start using a cane, which I think a lot of people can relate. You just didn't want to use a cane. But I knew I had to in order to be out and about and be safe. But I was hesitant because I really wanted to interact with people. And I know sometimes, the cane can seem a little intimidating to the public and maybe don't want to approach people that are blind or vision impaired using a cane. And I thought a dog would be a great conversation piece, a segue, and just, I like dogs.

And so my thought was to, "I'm going to get a dog, I need something. It's time. It's time for me to start really having some type of help consistently with me at all times, whether it be a cane or a dog." And I really preferred having a dog by my side. So that is what prompted me. It was really just that time to embrace the fact that I could not see very well, and I really needed something with me to help me when I was out and about. And I just went away to school too, and being alone, away from home, on a college campus, figuring out how to get to meals at night and just traversing campus.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. You got to make the meal time.

Jane Flower: Got to get to meal time.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Totally.

Jane Flower: So yep. All of those things.

Theresa Stern: Very cool.

Jane Flower: You can't always rely on people. You got to try to be independent, do it on your own.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. Absolutely. What did you thought, what surprised you, knowing that you were going to go get a guide dog? It's a unique experience having a guide dog, and you don't really know what it's going to be until you've really done it. And what surprised and delighted you about your relationship with your first guide dog?

Jane Flower: I think a couple of things. I felt better about myself having a dog by my side, just as being somebody who is blind or visually impaired. I felt more confident. I felt more poised walking around. I was kind of proud, I guess, if that's the right word to use. Because there's just such a stigma out there. And so just having this dog by my side, this beautiful yellow lab who people were attracted to and I was connected to her. It brought people to me to ask questions and it helped me come out of my shell a little bit too, about blindness and accepting the fact that I was losing my sight.

But I didn't know a whole lot about dogs, to be honest with you. When I got my first dog, I did not know a darn thing, honestly, other than I liked them. And so it was fun having a dog. And just, oh gosh, learning all about dogs, and what they were all about. And just having a dog in the house, I think, and after now having three dogs, it's just having a dog in general, I will always have a dog, whether it is a guide dog or a pet, I love having a dog around. There's just-

Theresa Stern: Having that companionship, that bond.

Jane Flower: Yeah. Yeah. It just gives you a good feeling, just having a dog around. They're just so loving and just want to please you all the time.

Theresa Stern: It's true. It's true. Absolutely. So tell me a little bit about your journey to coming to Guide Dogs and working at Guide Dogs for the Blind and then a little bit about your role.

Jane Flower: Yeah, so I got my second dog in 2009. I was heading off to grad school, really not wanting to traverse a college campus at night with my cane. I was in between dogs. My first dog had passed away in '07. And so I got my second dog, Anya. And was working at a independent living center, helping folks with vision loss, older adults with vision loss. An outreach position opened up at Guide Dogs, and jobs didn't open very often at Guide Dogs back then. And outreach is something that I had been doing for years. And-

Theresa Stern: Yes, I'm a testament to that.

Jane Flower: Right? Yes. And I love talking to people. I love guide dogs, obviously. Guide dogs just holds a special place in my heart, so I thought, "Well, why not?" It meant a move north from where I was living, but thought I would give it a go and apply for the outreach position. And glad I did. It opened up a whole lot of opportunities for me, working at Guide Dogs. It opened up just being even more independent because the job required a lot of travel-

Theresa Stern: Travel, yes. Yes.

Jane Flower: ... around the US. And I can remember going on very first trip with my dog and flying there, thinking, "Oh my Lord. When I land and I have my dog and how do I?" And we just did it. And we just did it and we learned together over time, and they're so smart and they remember places. And I could just land in any new city and get to a hotel I'd never been to and say, "Find the elevator." Because he knew what elevator meant and had learned that skill, it was just amazing to be able to land somewhere new and just feel independent on my own and not always having to have somebody help me.

Theresa Stern: So Jane, over the years working in outreach, you so seem to really notice a need for more services and programs for children and teens who are visually impaired. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that need and about how that developed, and some of the programs that you're offering now?

Jane Flower: Sure. Yeah. So Guide Dogs for the Blind had a couple of programs. They're on the periphery, if you will, of programming at Guide Dogs for the Blind was the Summer Camp Program and another program called our K9 Buddy Program. And so when I started, I took over facilitating the Summer Camp Program. And it just grew and expanded and more and more families were reaching out and asking about the Camp Program and the K9 Buddy Program. And it was expanding so much too, that I think, there was a need there. And I think a lot of times, when younger folks have come to Guide Dogs for the Blind to get a dog, and we have had kids under the age of 18 get guide dogs from us because we don't really have an age requirement. But we were really seeing in need of that lack of preparedness for getting a guide dog.

And I mean, I was a good example. I mean, I didn't know anything about dogs when I got my first guide dog. And living and working with a guide dog is so complex. Not to mention just the day to day care for a dog, but the orientation and mobility skills that are required to be able to successfully work with a guide dog. So we really started thinking that youth services was something that are going to be really important to us down the road, especially if we want to keep the pipelines of people coming to Guide Dogs for the Blind and getting their dogs. But we really wanted to see people coming to get guide dogs that are better prepared so that they're more successful with their dogs and that we can start serving a younger clientele as well.

Theresa Stern: So Jane, you and I, when we were growing up, there really wasn't any program that for youth that focused on the guide dog lifestyle. And I think for me anyway, I probably would've come to working with a guide dog, appreciate you moving these programs forward because as kids like us will now have that opportunity. So thank you.

Jane Flower: Yeah, I agree, Theresa. I think mobility, when you're blind or visually impaired, your mobility skills are so important. Probably number one for independence, being able to get out and about. And we have a choice. And a cane or a guide dog, both wonderful viable options for folks to have. And I really feel it's important to prepare and also prepare but inform young folks and their families too, about the options, about having a guide dog as a viable option. Because it isn't for everybody, having a guide dog. It's a huge responsibility, among other things and all that go along with the lifestyle. But I think it's important to inform and let the younger folks make their decision and choose how they want to get around independently, whether it's a cane or a dog.

Theresa Stern: Right. Just knowing that there's options. I think it opens up a whole nother world for folks. So Camp sounds super fun. Can you let our listeners know about, what our Campers get to experience when they come to Camp?

Jane Flower: Yeah. Camp is a lot of fun. Anybody that's been to Summer Camp knows that it is just a time to make new friends, make connections, have fun, eat smores.

Theresa Stern: Yes. Yes.

Jane Flower: You got to throw that in there, because we do, we do do that.

Theresa Stern: Sign me up, Jane.

Jane Flower: Yeah. Right? And I think it's really great because a lot of the kids that do come to Camp, and they come from all over the US and Canada, we are open to Canadians to come to Camp. We haven't had one yet. So if you're listening, we'd love to have you.

Theresa Stern: Be the first Canadian. Yes.

Jane Flower: Be the first Canadian to come to Camp. And a lot of times, they're the only ones in their hometown or their school that has a visual impairment. And so being able to come to a place where they are with others that are their same age, and having vision loss, and feeling like they belong in a place and be able to just connect and make new friends that way. And we just have a ton of fun. Camp's really special.

It is geared around, of course, guide dogs, because it is Guide Dogs for the Blind Summer Camp Program. And so we do have to have a lot of fun with dogs of course. And so we spend some time... Camp takes place in Oregon, near our

Oregon campus. And so we do spend time on the Oregon campus. Yeah. And they get to, of course, walk with a guide dog and get to really see what that's all about. Yep. And that really is sometimes what turns the tide for people's decisions after they've walked with the dog. And they spend time in the kennel, and they get to meet the veterinary staff, and do some fun activities with the vets.

And then we do a really special activity too, where they get to have an overnight with a dog. So they really get to see what it's like to take care of a dog for 20 hours. So all the stuff that goes along with that.

Theresa Stern: The good, the bad, and the ugly.

Jane Flower: ... the good, the bad, and the poop. Yeah. So they get to feed the dog, take them out, learn how to pick up after them, groom them, play with them, just what it's like to have a dog with you. So it's really, really cool that they get to do that. And then we just have camp fun. We hike, we have campfires, there's a pool where we hold Camp. So we swim and really just talk about-

Theresa Stern: Do you dog paddle? No, just kidding.

Jane Flower: Yes. Hopefully, everybody knows how to dog paddle. We did have one dog, a guide dog, get in the pool last summer by accident. And that was a lot of fun and craziness. So, but yeah. And then throughout the whole time, every activity we do, we try to kind of a little slant on guide dogs, and teaching and learning, and of course, talking about those orientation mobility skills. And Camp is great too, because it's a time for us to help kids forge their independence. So getting to mealtime on time, getting into activities on time. At Camp, they go up and get their own food. And so just little activities that we can encourage.

Theresa Stern: Builds that independence and build confidence.

Jane Flower: Builds independence and confidence. And being away from home, I think, is huge. And so this summer coming up, we're holding two camps, one for ages 14 to 17 and another for a little bit older of a group, 18 to 24. So we're covering that whole spectrum of transition age.

Theresa Stern: That's fantastic. That is so cool. That is so cool.

Jane Flower: Yeah. So much fun.

Theresa Stern: You have a new program, which is actually virtually-based. And I think it came out of with the pandemic not being able to get in together, but it's really become a super popular event and that's the Ready Set Forward. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Jane Flower: Yeah, so you're right. It did come out. We had to get real creative obviously, as everybody has had to because of the pandemic. And really wanted to reach out and get more people involved in this Guide Dogs for the Blind preparedness, youth. And really, parents. And we really want to reach out to parents too. And so part of the Ready Set Forward, and I love the name because forward is a guide dog command. It tells our dogs, "It's time to go forward." So I think it's a great title to talk about preparedness. So we have a workshop. It's a month long worth of workshops in a youth academy. And so we have a workshop for parents. Talking about The Canine Connection. Is your child ready for a guide dog?

And I think a lot of times, we get calls, often at Guide Dogs for the Blind about, "I want my child to have a guide dog. Oh, and they're eight years old." Or they're 12. And I think sometimes, people don't understand the complexities. And so I think it's important really to bring the parents into the conversation and really help them to understand all the complexities that go into it. And also, reinforce how important their child's orientation mobility skills are. And also then to introduce them to the K9 Buddy Program. So if their child isn't quite of the right age to qualify for a guide dog, because of the maturity levels that need to be in place to handle the complexities and the day-to-day care of a dog, we have this wonderful K9 Buddy Program, which we can talk about in a minute.

But so to bring the parents in, we also have, as part of the Ready Set Forward, a Canine Connection – Is Your Child Ready? So we're looping in the professionals as well, the orientation mobility specialist, the teachers for the visually impaired. Yeah. And then we have a youth academy, which is it's a week long, two hours a day on Zoom. So it's a week long, but two hours a day for those same two age groups. And really, more of a deep dive into dogs in general. We're teaching about dog communication, learning more about dogs in general, because there's that whole knowing about dogs is a huge part of getting a guide dog, like me being that person that came and didn't know a darn thing. It's great if you have some of that knowledge, so you're not coming into class to train with a guide dog and learning that part of it and also trying to understand dogs, because it's two different things and it's a lot.

Yeah. So as much information and preparedness we can get to these kids, the better prepared they're going to be. And so we have that youth academy and then the last one-

Theresa Stern: And what's the name? There's such a cute name for that.

Jane Flower: Oh, the Ruff, R-U-F-F, Ruff Life Academy.

Theresa Stern: So Jane, you have to tell me. Do you stay up nights, coming up with all these clever names?

Jane Flower: Not nights, but it does consume a lot of my brain power, sometimes.

Theresa Stern: Well, it's quite impressive, I have to say.

Jane Flower: Because I just think it has to... And I like to have fun names and be creative with dog stuff.

Theresa Stern: I love it. I love it.

Jane Flower: And then the last part of the Ready Set Forward is the Wags and Wisdom panel. Okay. And we bring together some guide dog for the blind alumni who graduated with their first guide dog at a young age. So whether they were in high school or early in college, to share their experiences, maybe some of the challenges they had, some of good advice they might have for anybody thinking about getting a dog at a younger age. And so that's the last part of the workshop. And registration is open now for all of those workshops and the youth academy on our webpage, on our youth.

Theresa Stern: Super cool. I love it. I love it.

Jane Flower: Yeah. It's fun.

Theresa Stern: And then you just teased us a little bit about the K9 Buddy Program. Yeah. Can you tell us a little bit about that program?

Jane Flower: Yes. And I love this program. And Theresa, I think you were one of the people that helped start this program way back in the day.

Theresa Stern: Way back.

Jane Flower: Way back, I know. I hate that we have to say decades now. Because then I really feel old.

Theresa Stern: I know.

Jane Flower: But it is. It's decades.

Theresa Stern: It's decades.

Jane Flower: I know. So the K9 Buddy is a program where there might be a dog that comes through the training program to be a guide dog that just doesn't want to be a guide dog. It's a hard job. It's a hard job. And so we want to gift those dogs, because they're amazing dogs. They may not make the cut to be a guide dog, but they're just super awesome, well trained. And so we want to gift those dogs to families who have a child that's blind or visually impaired.

So the child needs to be at least five years of age, and the dog is free. It is a gift to the family. And our hope is that we're placing a dog in a family with a child that maybe that child will grow up and want to have a guide dog someday from

Guide Dogs for the Blind. But with that said, they're going to have all of that dog prep knowledge. They're going to have had a dog in their life, a companion, a friend, one that they've taken care of for how many years, and learned all of those things that you need to do to just have a dog in your life.

And so it's been amazing. And we are actively placing canine buddies as we speak. And we've seen these kids and the parents reporting to us just how their child has maybe been shy, or timid, or what have you, and have really come out of their shell now that they've had their dog. And they're learning advocacy... This is the part I love. They're learning advocacy skills, which are super important when you're blind or visually impaired. Because they're speaking up for their dog, even within the family. And I just think that's amazing and giving them something to take care of. And instead of always being "the one that people think needs to be taken care of." They're able to take care of something. And it just, again, builds that confidence. And so it's a great program and it's growing, and expanding, and we are super excited about that.

Theresa Stern: So Jane, it seems like Guide Dogs is really committed to offering the continuity of programs that can help someone from the very beginning along their entire journey. Can you give us an example of maybe a youth that has taken that path?

Jane Flower: Yeah, sure. We've had a couple of examples. I have one person that comes to mind. He received a K9 Buddy from us when he was probably, I'm not sure, maybe 8, 9, 10 years old when he got his K9 Buddy. And then he came to our Summer Camp Program and he came to Camp, I think, two or three summers, which was fantastic. And then in his senior year of high school, he knew he was going to be going college and he decided he was ready to apply for a guide dog. So he applied for a dog and got his new guide dog and he got accepted to Yale University.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Oh my gosh.

Jane Flower: Which is crazy. Yeah. Amazing. And he's just one example. I can think of a couple others that followed that same trajectory. Started out getting that K9 Buddy, and grew up with a dog, and then came into our Summer Camp Program. And then also it was that time and ready to get a guide dog. And now's a dog and is heading out into the world. And it's fantastic. So that's what I love seeing. And that's what we are hoping more of to happen in the future, is family and people coming to us in the beginning of their journeys and letting us support them along the way.

Theresa Stern: That's great. That's great. It sounds like our program's changed the whole direction of his life. That's fantastic.

Jane Flower: It can. And I think reaching people at a younger age and teaching them from a younger age about all their options and all the things that are available to them,



and again, giving them the power to make those decisions too, as they get older as to which direction they want their life to go, I think that's important.

Theresa Stern: That's great. So, Jane, as you know, we're celebrating our 80th anniversary at Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Jane Flower: Yeah. It's amazing.

Theresa Stern: It's pretty amazing. And I'm wondering if you had a magic ball or a magic mirror or whatever looked to the future, what would you see in the future for Guide Dogs for the Blind? Or what do you hope that you see for us?

Jane Flower: Gosh, well, you specifically, yeah, I think there are a lot of really cool things have helping at Guide Dogs for the Blind right now. I see us not only with the youth programs, but with some of our other amazing programs that I'm sure this podcast will feature down the road as well, really helping the whole person, not just somebody's coming into Guide Dogs to get a guide dog, but also just all of those other parts of somebody's life that need to be attended to when they have a visual impairment.

So I can see us expanding some of our services in that direction, especially with youth, obviously, and some of our adult programs as well, because there's just such a need. And there's so many gaps throughout the country for people being able to get into some of these programs and these services that are so needed. And so if we can help fill some of those gaps and help people also on their trajectory to getting a guide dog as well, I think that would be fantastic. And I see some of our programs heading in some of that direction as well.

Theresa Stern: I love it. I love it. Gosh, I think anybody listening to this show would be like, "Jane has the coolest job." So Jane, what is the favorite part of your job for you? What really inspires you?

Jane Flower: I think because I was a kid growing up, and I grew up before the ADA was a thing, like you Theresa. And there just weren't all of these things in place. There wasn't the support. There wasn't the programming. There weren't all of things to really help us, back in the day, get prepared and get going in life as a person that's blind or visually impaired. And so being able to be somebody to now be a part of helping the younger generation, that's blind or visually impaired and coming up, just being able to be somebody to help them be a part of their process that hopefully makes a difference in their life also. And I really do love connecting with the families and the parents as well, because I remember my mom didn't have any of that.

She didn't have any support and any of those things. She was on her own traversing all of it. And I love being... I don't even like using the word role model, but being able to tell parents, especially ones that are struggling with a new diagnosis, maybe with their kids to be able to say, "Hey, your kids are going to

be great. Look at this amazing community of people and support that's out there. Let us be there with you and walk alongside you. And-"

Theresa Stern: "We got you."

Jane Flower: "We got you. And help you." And dogs do that. It's all about connection. And I think that's what I love about working at Guide Dogs for the Blind, because that's what dogs do for people. They bring people together in so many ways. So I think that's what I love about my job.

Theresa Stern: That's beautiful. That is amazing. That inspires me. And Jane, I have to say, I have gotten opportunity to see some of the letters from either youth in your programs or parents who've had youth go through the programs. And what a huge difference it's made to people. So thank you, Jane. Thank you so much for being here today. Thank you so much for what you do for Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Jane Flower: Yeah. Thanks, Theresa. And thanks for having me on today. This is so great. And I love that we're doing this podcast. And I think it's a great way to get information out there to people, to families, to youth, to anybody that's interested in coming to Guide Dogs for the Blind to get a dog. Yeah, we're always here and available to answer questions and help you along your journey.

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