

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

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Central Bark. Today we have an amazing guest, Shane Dittmar. And Shane is an educator, an advocate, and an amazing musician. So, let's dig in and find out more about Shane. Shane, tell me a little bit about yourself and about your connection to the Guide Dogs for the Blind community.

Shane Dittmar: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for having me. It's such an honor to be on Central Bark. I really feel like I've made it-

Theresa Stern: You have.

Shane Dittmar: ... as a person. Yeah. So you covered a lot of it. I'm Shane. I have a black lab from Guide Dogs for the Blind named Chevelle. I guess I could talk about me, but it's more fun to talk about him. We'll come back to that. I am originally from Raleigh, North Carolina, which is where I grew up with... I have a twin brother who is also a GDB grad, and I spent a while in Washington state teaching music there at the Washington School for the Blind. And now I live in Brooklyn in New York City near Central Park. Well, actually, closer to Prospect Park, but this show's not called Prospect Bark.

Theresa Stern: That'll be the spinoff. Yeah.

Shane Dittmar: Yeah, that'll be the East Coast version.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Shane Dittmar: Like you said, I was an educator for many years, and I still do a bunch of that. I am a composer and a musician, and I write musical theater. I work in accessibility as well. I do testing and compliance stuff in that world. And I drag my dog to a lot of Broadway stuff.

Theresa Stern: Lucky dog.

Shane Dittmar: Right.

Theresa Stern: So, how long have you and Chevelle been together?

Shane Dittmar: We have been together since March of 2014.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness.

Shane Dittmar: I was almost sure I got that right. I did. That's correct. Yeah. So we're coming up on nine here in a month or two.

Theresa Stern: That's amazing. That's amazing! And is Chevelle your first guide dog?

Shane Dittmar: Yeah. Yeah, Chevelle is my very first. We grew up with dogs in the house, so I've lived with dogs my whole life. But Chevelle is my first guide dog, and I got him when I was in my sophomore year of college.

Theresa Stern: That is great. And I'm just wondering how has Chevelle... You've mentioned going to Broadway musicals. And I mean, being a musician, I'm sure you're in lots of different clubs and performance areas and things like that. How does Chevelle handle all that?

Shane Dittmar: He does really, really well with it. After we graduated, my class was... The second week of my class was my spring break at the school I was going to. And when we got back, every week at the school, the music department would have a big meeting, and people would perform for one another to get a chance to practice performing. It'd be all kinds of different stuff. You'd hear people singing classical opera stuff, and you'd hear clarinet music. So the very first thing Chevelle had to listen to with me when we got to school for the very first time was a snare-drum solo.

Theresa Stern: Oh my. Okay.

Shane Dittmar: Uh-huh. But he did fine with that, and he's done fine pretty much ever since. He's very steady. He doesn't get overwhelmed by the sound. He's very impressive. I get more overwhelmed by the sound, honestly.

Theresa Stern: The sound, you're like... Yeah.

Shane Dittmar: Right. Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Wow! Wow! And I know you mentioned that you used to teach at the School for the Blind, I believe, in Washington, and teach music and music theory. What was that like to be able to share your love and your gift for music with others?

Shane Dittmar: That was really, really cool to get to do that. I absolutely loved it. I have loved the music thing forever. I like to tell people that all babies are born singing, and I just didn't stop, and eventually, there were notes and words and stuff. So I've always been into music. I had a garage band with my brother and two besties that lived down the street.

Theresa Stern: Okay. What was the name of the garage band?

Shane Dittmar: I'm absolutely not going to share that piece of information with you-

Theresa Stern: Oh, man!

Shane Dittmar: ... because I can't get all of the videos off of the internet.

Theresa Stern: Oh no!

Shane Dittmar: I've tried. I filed copyright claims against myself on YouTube. I can't seem to make them disappear. It's the bane of my existence.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness.

Shane Dittmar: It's a closely guarded secret.

Theresa Stern: Okay, okay. We'll let you have that one secret.

Shane Dittmar: Oh gosh. Yeah, it was like... Yeah, the songs I wrote when I was 14 were not reflective of a particularly vast life experience, I would say.

Theresa Stern: Yes, I can imagine.

Shane Dittmar: But anyway, we did all that. And as I was in school, I realized that I really... I guess in high school, I kind of started realizing that I liked teaching when I would get a chance to lead little things, like theater rehearsals or even... I was in a web development class, where I got to take on a project-management kind of role and teach in that capacity. And I realized that I really liked teaching, and so I went and got my degree in music education and studied choir teaching and all that sort of stuff. And I really sincerely thought I was going to end up getting just a choir teaching job at a middle high school just in North Carolina somewhere. And the opportunity... My cooperating teacher for my student teaching actually sent me this link to the job posting at Washington State School for the Blind for a music teacher. And it was like, "We want someone who knows about blindness and can work with blind students, and knows music braille, and can teach choir, and can teach bands, and knows rock styles." And the person sending this to me was like, "Does anyone exist who can do all those things?" And I was like, "I know one."

Theresa Stern: One.

Shane Dittmar: Right. And I ended up applying for it and getting it, and it was really, really an awesome opportunity to get to go share. I loved working with kids at the School for the Blind. I was in public schools my entire education career. So I had done some short programs at the School for the Blind in North Carolina, but never been a student at a school like that. So it was cool to get to learn and also get to work with those kids and kind of be... It always feels bad to call yourself a role model. That feels wrong instinctively. But I think I got to do that, and it was neat. And it was really cool to have an opportunity to get to do some advocating for students with disabilities and also get to really push this music-braille literacy thing.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Shane Dittmar: Music braille is cool and weird and hard.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, it's cool, weird, and hard, and I think that most people don't understand just how challenging it can be and how challenging it is for musicians to find braille music. Have you had-

Shane Dittmar: Very hard.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Shane Dittmar: I mean, I've gotten sort of good at tracking it down where I can and also at using some of the tools to create it for myself. So I've done a lot of... When I do theater stuff, it's all me having to get in touch with these licensing organizations that provide all the materials and ask them really nicely to send me digital files in specific formats so that I can turn them into braille and emboss them here, because you can't just order music braille for a theater score or whatever.

Theresa Stern: No, you can't. And I think it turns a lot of people away from music. So I'm so proud of you, and you really are a role model for-

Shane Dittmar: Oh, no.

Theresa Stern: ... for sticking to it and for your students, because you showed them that it can... If you have enough tenacity, you can make it happen. So I do think you are a role model.

Shane Dittmar: Oh, thank you. That's really kind. What else do you love about me, Theresa? Let's... No.

Theresa Stern: Oh, well, let's just make a list. Should we start with A?

Shane Dittmar: Yeah, alphabetical is fine.

Theresa Stern: But tell me a little bit more about your music and theater and what you're up to. And then I want to know what your plans are, what kind of things you have up your sleeve for the future.

Shane Dittmar: Yeah. I do a lot of different kinds of music stuff. I've done a lot of just songwriting, and I really enjoy music directing for theater, so playing the piano and teaching the parts to the performers. I've done a little bit of acting in musical theater. I'm not particularly good at memorizing lines, and that gets you in trouble. But I've done a bunch of that. I really enjoy arranging and orchestrating and doing production and stuff. But my big love is writing for musical theater.

Theresa Stern: Really?

Shane Dittmar: Yeah. So I've been doing that for a while and really trying to do it more intentionally in the last year or two and gotten to make some really cool stuff. I got to do this virtual theater festival through a company called Roundabout Theater over the pandemic times that was offered to disabled theater artists, and that was really cool. And through that, I actually met and started working with my writing partner, Sarah, who is excellent. And they are also Brooklyn based. I worked with them on stuff for almost a year before I ever met them in person.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Shane Dittmar: So we have been working on some fun projects, including this musical podcast that we are working on based on... I like to tell people, it's a fantasy musical podcast inspired by D&D that's like a part epic adventure and part friends-to-enemies-to-lovers romance, or enemies-to-friends. That would be a weird arc the other way. But I just call it Nerd Bingo for short because it's... But it's so much fun. And we've been working on that together and writing other sorts of stuff. We wrote a 10-minute musical about a dinosaur a month or two ago. It's pretty fun.

Theresa Stern: Oh, that's fantastic. Is there a way for people to check out your podcast or-

Shane Dittmar: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Oh, tell us what it's called because I'm totally intrigued. Yeah.

Shane Dittmar: Excellent. Yeah. So we got a couple of friends together and recorded the first episode of what we were working on just as a proof of concept, and we put that out as a podcast. It's called The Reality Shaper.

Theresa Stern: Okay, great.

Shane Dittmar: And there's links to Spotify and the RSS and all those kinds of podcasty things at therealityshaper.com.

Theresa Stern: Therealityshaper.com. We will check that out. That sounds amazing.

Shane Dittmar: Hot dog. Thank you.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. You said something, you mentioned something about that you've done a little bit of... not just behind the stage or behind the scenes directing and that kind of thing, but also being on stage. As a person with a visual impairment, was that challenging for you? Was it difficult to find your mark, or was it difficult to even get people to believe in you to be able to be on stage?

Shane Dittmar: How shocking would it be if I said no, right? No, it was.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, right, right.

Shane Dittmar: It definitely was. I mean, my middle school... My sixth-grade band teacher still tells his students about the time that he had a blind student... that blind student is me... at the very first concert of sixth grade walk straight off the front of the stage holding a clarinet.

Theresa Stern: Nice.

Shane Dittmar: But he tells the story because I tucked and rolled, so the clarinet wouldn't hit. And he's like, "You need to care at least that much about your instrument."

Theresa Stern: Nice.

Shane Dittmar: Yeah. And when I started doing musical theater, the first show I was in was Annie, which is a delight.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Shane Dittmar: It was kind of a mixed blessing, right? So this teacher got me into it and said, "Come audition for this. You can do this." And I was like, "I don't think I can." And then I did. But then also, I got cast as FDR, who famously-

Theresa Stern: Oh, you did?

Shane Dittmar: ... was in a wheelchair.

Theresa Stern: In the wheelchair.

Shane Dittmar: Yeah. So I got to be in a musical, but they got... So I feel really bad for this girl. Her name is Sarah, and I am very sorry to her, whose job in the musical was to push me around. Yeah, so that's how they handled that. And then after that, I was like, "I could just walk actually if you'd like in shows."

Theresa Stern: Yeah, right. We don't have to come up with something else. Yeah.

Shane Dittmar: Right. But also it was good... I don't know. Training wheels feels like a joke because of the chair, but it was. It was. Like, I got to do a bunch of the other... I distinctly remember in that show was the first time I learned how to point correctly.

Theresa Stern: Okay, right.

Shane Dittmar: I didn't know whether you're supposed to use your whole hand or just a finger. I assumed the pointing finger, it's for pointing. But you're not supposed to do that at people, apparently. Who knew?

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Shane Dittmar: I know.

Theresa Stern: I know.

Shane Dittmar: I learned that from my wheelchair in FDR. I learned how to convincingly fake smoke a cigarette on a cigarette... Yeah. I learned lots of cool stuff.

Theresa Stern: Awesome. That's good.

Shane Dittmar: I know. I know. I was such a cool kid.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. It's things that I think most people who have vision might take for granted, but if you haven't really seen somebody smoke a cigarette or point or whatever, we have to kind of learn that stuff.

Shane Dittmar: Exactly.

Theresa Stern: So, yeah, yeah.

Shane Dittmar: I mean, this is such a tangent. Sorry. This is how my brain works.

Theresa Stern: That's good.

Shane Dittmar: I distinctly remember when I learned that waving was like a side-to-side, not like a rotation thing. And then I thought waving was an up-and-down thing for a little bit, because you just read books and everyone's waving their hand.

Theresa Stern: Waving. Yeah, yeah.

Shane Dittmar: It doesn't say. No one's like, "It's a lateral movement from left to right, and it's not a lot. And you just kind of wiggle your wrist a little bit, but you don't..." It's a whole thing.

Theresa Stern: Unless you're the queen.

Shane Dittmar: Unless you're the queen. And then I learned that. And then I learned that I've been doing it the fancy royal way the whole time.

Theresa Stern: The whole time.

Shane Dittmar: And no one should have stopped me. Anyway, that's news your listeners can use.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Shane Dittmar: So yeah, that stuff and the eternal struggle of getting materials. I had really supportive TVIs and programs when I was in school that really went above and beyond what I happen to know is standard in terms of getting me access to stuff. But it was always how do you... A lot of people can just take the script up there and read it while you're running through things in the audition. And I'm in an audition holding a laptop in one arm, using the arrow keys to read this script with JAWS, trying to act and stuff.

So yes, I was really fortunate that I got to be in a place where I got the chance to try and make those things work, and I've really enjoyed getting to work with some of the organizations that I've worked with that have made accessibility a priority. And I'm actually music directing Into the Woods this spring in New York City with a group here called EPIC that is a specifically neuro-inclusive and disability-aware theater company. So a lot of their members are in various places in the neuro-divergent autism-spectrum world, and then they have people with other kinds of physical disabilities as well. And it's really neat to get to be in a theater space at a paid level, at a high production-value level that's also centering, making accommodations and providing access and being open to people who aren't just the typical or whatever pejorative word you want to use. Right.

Theresa Stern: No, totally. And I think what's cool about all that is that it really is a nice sort of marriage of all your skills, as obviously your musical talent, your education, because I'm sure you're having to figure out what best method to communicate with each of your actors that might have a different mode of learning and that kind of thing, and then the advocacy piece. So yeah.

Shane Dittmar: Yeah, it checks all my boxes. It's great. I'm so excited about it.

Theresa Stern: I know, and it's a job. That's so cool.

Shane Dittmar: And it's that too.

Theresa Stern: I know you said you're going to be doing Into the Woods. What other stuff do you have sort of percolating in your brain that you might be up to?

Shane Dittmar: Sarah, my writing partner, and I are going to keep working on this podcast, and we're working on trying to figure out a best system for doing the first full season of that because it's... For some reason, we decided making a two-hour musical would be too easy, and we wrote a six-hour podcast musical instead. So we're trying to get together all the resources to produce that and get that recorded. We're also actually going to be writing a show this year for EPIC, that company I was just talking about, to do as a theater-for-young-audiences piece with some of their casts in New York. And then I am in a program called the BMI Musical Theater Writers Workshop, which is a weekly thing here where we get partnered up and work on writing different songs and practice the craft of writing theater.

Theresa Stern: Wow!

Shane Dittmar: And what else do I do? I don't know. Stuff shows up.

Theresa Stern: Maybe an appearance on the Tonys-

Shane Dittmar: I mean, listen.

Theresa Stern: ... sometime soon.

Shane Dittmar: If they invite me, I'll go.

Theresa Stern: Okay.

Shane Dittmar: I have started making friends with all the other people who have service dogs that work on Broadway. It's great.

Theresa Stern: Are there a bunch? Are there folks?

Shane Dittmar: Well, a bunch is a strong word.

Theresa Stern: Well, you know what I mean.

Shane Dittmar: There are a few.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, a few is a bunch in our group.

Shane Dittmar: Yeah. I have a friend who has a service dog that does a lot of accessibility work on Broadway. And I have a friend who has a psychiatric service dog who is a stage manager and has done some work. And I got to meet a couple of the bomb-sniffing dogs that work on Broadway, and one of them is actually a career change from a school over here on the East Coast.

Theresa Stern: Is that right?

Shane Dittmar: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Wow, wow, wow, wow.

Shane Dittmar: Yeah. I think we should do a Dogs of Broadway calendar. I'm working on this. This is my dream.

Theresa Stern: Well, I was thinking or a musical-

Shane Dittmar: Yes. Yes. Ooh.

Theresa Stern: ... about that partnership.

Shane Dittmar: Yes. Just like Cats the musical, but different.

Theresa Stern: Dogs the musical. Yes. Oh my goodness. Well, very cool. Well, it has been so much fun chatting with you and learning about your just super-interesting life. I honestly can't wait to see what comes up next, and I'm not kidding about the Tonys. So Shane, I want to thank you so much for being here today on Central Bark.

Shane Dittmar: Thank you so much. And I have to make sure I say Chevelle is a very, very good boy. He's an excellent boy. He's the best boy, and I hope all of you know that because he's the best.

Theresa Stern: Oh, well, give him a big hug from all of us.

Shane Dittmar: I absolutely will. Chevelle's the best dog. So if you want to fight me about it, too bad.

Theresa Stern: Well, we might. Yeah.

Shane Dittmar: Well, that's fine.

Theresa Stern: All right, well, thank you.

Shane Dittmar: Thank you.

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