

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. I'm so excited to be welcoming our guest today. Her name is Brooke Coelho and she lives all the way over on the other coast in Rhode Island. She is a brand new handler from Guide Dogs For The Blind and has recently received her guide dog Davos and excited to see how all that went for her and what she's up to now. So welcome, Brooke. We're so happy to have you.

Brooke Coelho: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Theresa Stern: So Brooke, tell us a little bit about yourself and how you decided to explore getting a guide dog and then coming to Guide Dogs For The Blind?

Brooke Coelho: So I started losing my sight at a pretty young age and I didn't really have much of the resources that I needed. So when I was in my mid twenties, I want to say, I probably started getting a little bit more involved. I started getting cane training. And after a couple years with my cane, I just felt like I wasn't going as fast as I wanted to. It didn't feel like it was freeing me as much as it was in the beginning. So I did some research into guide dogs and I came across Guide Dogs For The Blind, and I saw that they had amazing support systems during the whole application process, throughout training, and then afterwards up until retirement and even afterwards. So that was one of the biggest selling points for me.

Theresa Stern: Great. Great. And I know you've got some kids at home.

Brooke Coelho: I do.

Theresa Stern: So tell me a little bit about that and how your new guide dog is fitting into your family?

Brooke Coelho: So I have two children. I have a 13 year old and a 10 year old and we have three pet dogs as it is, so.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness. Tell me about your pet dogs.

Brooke Coelho: I have a german shepherd who is about six years old. Her name is Nina. I have a pit bull mix. I think he's got boxer. He was adopted from the local shelter and he is about, I want to say nine or so. We're not even sure about his age, honestly.

Theresa Stern: Okay.

Brooke Coelho: He is such a sweet boy. And then we have a French bulldog named Petunia.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh.

Brooke Coelho: She runs the house.

Theresa Stern: Oh, I would imagine.

Brooke Coelho: So bringing home another dog and he's the biggest of them all, they were a little intimidated at first. But honestly, all of them get along so well together. It's nice. The boys, they lay together on the bed. They just lounge out. They'll even play together with toys. And of course the little Frenchie, she's always the one that she's got to be top dog, so she'll lay on top of Davos sometimes. He just kind of looks at her like, okay.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness. So now when you came to get your guide dog, did you come to California or Oregon or did you have in home training?

Brooke Coelho: I went home to the Oregon campus actually.

Theresa Stern: Oh, you did.

Brooke Coelho: I did.

Theresa Stern: Oh, it's so beautiful there.

Brooke Coelho: Oh, it's gorgeous. I had never traveled. So this was my first time really traveling on a plane out of state.

Theresa Stern: Is that right? Oh my gosh.

Brooke Coelho: Yes. So it was so awesome. My first time was leaving alone and then coming back with my dog, it was amazing.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness. Wow. So you came into campus, you're there for one day, right?

Brooke Coelho: I actually came in late.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Brooke Coelho: I had a snowstorm the day I was supposed to leave and they canceled our flight.

Theresa Stern: Oh, shoot.

Brooke Coelho: So I actually showed up on dog day.

Theresa Stern: Okay.

Brooke Coelho: We ran through everything we needed to do. As soon as I got on campus, I met with the trainer. We did our pace assessment. We did everything we kind of needed to do and then she came in and brought Davos to me.

Theresa Stern: Oh. So tell me about that. That's exactly what I was going to ask.

Brooke Coelho: Oh my gosh.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Tell me about that first meeting. How did that go?

Brooke Coelho: So I had barely slept the night before, obviously. I was exhausted, but I was so excited. I was just running on adrenaline at that point. And when she brought him in, I was like, oh my gosh. And he jumped up on the bed and she was like, "He's not supposed to do that." And I was like, "Oh, I'm sorry." But we were just so excited to see each other and he was running in between my legs.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness.

Brooke Coelho: Oh, it was like an instant connection.

Theresa Stern: Aw. And I'm assuming, is he a Labrador?

Brooke Coelho: He is a black lab. Yep.

Theresa Stern: Oh boy. Oh my gosh. He must be like a squishy big bear.

Brooke Coelho: Oh, he is the best. He's got these beautiful, bright brown eyes. They're like a bright honey color almost. They're so beautiful. And he is just got like this stare where he looks at you and you just melt sometimes. And he'll cuddle with me. He is such a cutie. He's my best friend. I have my other dogs, they're my pet dogs. But the bond that you have with your guide dog, it's so different because the trust that you have to have in them it just brings that bond that you have with your pet and it maximizes it to a thousand. It's beyond words.

Theresa Stern: Right. Right. Let me just pull at that a little bit, because I think that's so unique I think for those of us who are really fortunate enough to get this opportunity to work with a guide dog.

Brooke Coelho: Absolutely.

Theresa Stern: Tell me about that first walk and how the trust came together for you? Because it's a little funky at first, right? It's a little scary.

Brooke Coelho: It is.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Brooke Coelho: Yeah. But honestly, after my first walk, I wasn't expecting to have the reaction I did. I literally was in tears, breaking down. I was like just the feeling of freedom you have walking around and you're going at a faster pace than you would normally have. You just feel more confident and it's such a different feeling. You feel like you blend into the crowd rather than kind of stand out as you would with your cane. Even though you have a harness, there's a lot of people that will ask me, "Oh, are you training him?" And I'm like, "No, this is my guide dog."

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Brooke Coelho: They don't understand. And you don't stick out as much as you would with a white cane.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Isn't that interesting? Because I mean, people do notice them, it seems like they noticed them but not necessarily our blindness, which is nice.

Brooke Coelho: Exactly.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Brooke Coelho: And it makes it a nicer segue into the conversation and you can open up about awareness and the program itself. People always ask me, "Oh, Guide Dogs For The Blind?" They've never heard of it on the east coast because it's a west coast school. So I get to explain to them the whole process and how I went to training and all the hard work we put in together and just everything about it. It's a nice segue to open up the communication to people about these things that they may not have known about beforehand.

Theresa Stern: Right. Right. Right.

Brooke Coelho: And they might've felt sort of intimidated to ask somebody with a white cane.

Theresa Stern: It's true.

Brooke Coelho: "Hey, what's your condition? How do you manage?" or things like that. They might just feel a little uncomfortable. But when you have a dog, it just eases up the conversation a little.

Theresa Stern: Wow. So just maybe tell our listeners a little bit about what your class experience was like? Did you have other classmates or what the days were like?

Brooke Coelho: We were the first class back after COVID, I believe, at the Oregon campus.

Theresa Stern: Wow, okay.

Brooke Coelho: Or maybe the second.

Theresa Stern: Okay. Yep.

Brooke Coelho: I want to say we were one of the first classes. So it was very small. There was only four of us in total. It was really awesome, honestly. Because it was a smaller group, it felt more intimate. We could bond with the other students. You didn't feel rushed when you were doing anything. You felt like you could ask them to explain things more or you could redo things a little like, "Hey, I didn't understand that. Could we maybe go through that again?" It wasn't sort of like, "Hey, we have 10 other people we need to get to." It was very easy and flexible. It was, what are you guys interested in learning? What are the environments in your hometowns? And then they would try to replicate it. So it was nice. It made it feel like those skills we were learning we could also transfer to home and not have any sort of anxiety about that.

So I had never been in a space before that was accessible to blind people fully. Just the contrast, the lighting, there were so many different things that I was like, "Oh my gosh, I can do this at home." I had just never even thought about it because we're so used to being in a sighted world that you don't even think about the adaptation. You don't even think about the adaptive behaviors that you take on to be successful in that sighted world. So being in an environment where you didn't have to think about little things like that, it was nice. It took the pressure off and it allowed you to focus more on what you were there for, for guide dog training and learning all about that. How be safe, how to keep your dog safe and healthy and how to maintain the training when you get home.

Theresa Stern: Right. Yeah. That's awesome. And so when you told your family that you were going to go train with a guide dog, what were they thinking? Were they like, "Oh my gosh, that's awesome." Or, "Well, I don't know if you should do that," Or what was the vibe there?

Brooke Coelho: A lot of people thought I was crazy because I had three pet dogs. So they were like, "You're going to get another dog." And I'm like, "But it's completely different." It's not the same. But they thought a lot of my family, even though they know me, I'm blind, I'm the only reference of blindness they have. So getting a guide dog was, again, opening them up to a whole new world. The same with me. I had never experienced guide dog handling. I don't know any guide dog handlers. I mean I do now, but.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, yeah. Of course.

Brooke Coelho: I didn't beforehand.

Theresa Stern: You're connected now, yeah.

Brooke Coelho: Yeah. My whole reference was just all the research I had done online and then going into it myself. So being able to get into it and explain, no, it's not as simple as it looks. It's not just grab your harness and go.

Theresa Stern: Right.

Brooke Coelho: You're a team, you have to work together. It gives you that opportunity to explain how it works and all the hard work you both put into it.

Theresa Stern: That's right. That's right. And I think sometimes people, they think, oh, the dog just goes. You tell him to go to the bank and he just goes to the bank.

Brooke Coelho: Exactly.

Theresa Stern: There's a whole lot that goes on for learning-

Brooke Coelho: That misconception.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. You did a ton of orientation, mobility instruction before you came to get a guide dog. And of course the dog had all of its training too. Wow. So what do you find looking back and thinking before you got your guide dog, you had applied and you're waiting to come in, what your life would be like? What sort of surprised you the most or something maybe unexpected?

Brooke Coelho: Like I said, that hard work. I didn't realize that it was going to be a lot of that bonding together, that working together. I think I was under that misconception as well that guide dogs were seeing eye dogs. That you would just say, "Hey, let's go here," and then we would go. I had an idea that there was some training, but I don't think I understood how much work actually goes into it and how many different things you need to keep in track of. When you're on your walk and you're working with your dog and you need to make sure about other dogs and distractions and things like that. You have a whole other being now to take care of and be responsible for, but they're also responsible in taking care of you. So it's that mutual relationship and just keeping that hard work to build that relationship.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah. So it sounds like when Davos came home, he got along well with all the other four-legged and two-legged kids in the household. Yeah.

Brooke Coelho: It was interesting too, because of course we got another snowstorm right before we came home.

Theresa Stern: Oh no.

Brooke Coelho: So he came home to a whole bunch of snow.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh.

Brooke Coelho: And he was just like, what is this?

Theresa Stern: Oh, I bet.

Brooke Coelho: Oh, he is from California originally.

Theresa Stern: Oh. So he really didn't get much snow. Oh, wow.

Brooke Coelho: Yes. So he was raised in Long Beach. He was at the San Rafael campus. He was actually with another handler for a few months out, I believe, in Missouri. So he really didn't have a reference of snow at all.

Theresa Stern: What the heck is this stuff?

Brooke Coelho: Yes. And he was there during the summer, so he had heat. And then he came home with me and it was just like, what is this?

Theresa Stern: What did he do?

Brooke Coelho: But he was totally okay.

Theresa Stern: What was his reaction?

Brooke Coelho: He was a little confused at first.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Brooke Coelho: Can I go on this? But he's not a huge fan. He likes snow more than rain.

Theresa Stern: Yes, yes. Yeah. Oh my gosh. How fun. Oh, so as a mom, I know it's that time of year. Kids are going back to school. How's that going? And how does Davos kind of help you navigate all of those responsibilities?

Brooke Coelho: It's really nice. We're getting excited because on Monday we have an open house event to go to and then on Wednesday the kids actually go back to school. So we're getting into our routine and getting ready for that. We walk to school and he loves it.

Theresa Stern: Oh, you do? That's great. Oh yeah. I bet he does love that. Yeah.

Brooke Coelho: So a twice a day walk, he gets to go out and it's exciting because he gets to see all the kids and he does amazing with the kids. And honestly, the kids at our school do great with him and they love to come up and ask questions. And I have these little cards that I printed out that I can hand out to them. And it's such a fun experience. It gives him the opportunity to earn some kibble because he's doing so well.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, he's a good boy.

Brooke Coelho: Yes. So he's always excited to go.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh. So I imagine that your kids are very popular on campus with their new brother, Davos. Yeah.

Brooke Coelho: Oh, yes. Yes. And it's so funny because our community is pretty small. So when we're walking to go get a coffee or something, we might hear, "Oh hey, it's that lady with a guide dog." And it's just so funny because that's how we're getting recognized now.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. You're celebrities.

Brooke Coelho: And it's spreading that awareness.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Brooke Coelho: That's the biggest thing.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, you're right. Because it does open it up so that you can tell folks about what it's like to live with a visual impairment and the great resources Guide Dogs For The Blind. So you've got the kids all ready going back to school and I hear that you've got some plans for back to school as well. Can you tell us a little bit about that, Brooke?

Brooke Coelho: I do. I was just accepted to Rhode Island College. So I am going to be starting-

Theresa Stern: Congratulations.

Brooke Coelho: Thank you.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Brooke Coelho: I was hoping to start in the fall, but I'm actually going to defer until January just to give myself some time to get ready as far as assisted tech and things like that, learning the campus. I'm actually going back to school for Portuguese hoping to-

Theresa Stern: Really?

Brooke Coelho: Yes. I'm hoping to get a degree in that and then maybe do interpreting or translating. Something with that in the medical or law field.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Great. I love that. I love that. Definitely my next travel dream is to go to Portugal.

Brooke Coelho: Oh absolutely.

Theresa Stern: So I'll have to get some words from you before I go.

Brooke Coelho: We're actually hoping to plan like a family trip to Portugal next year. So that'll be fun.

Theresa Stern: That's great. That's great. Is your family Portuguese or why are the interest in Portugal?

Brooke Coelho: I am like quarter Portuguese, but my husband and his family are from Portugal. They came over when he was about 10 years old.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh.

Brooke Coelho: That, with my background, it's definitely given me the boost to want to get into it more. And I've always loved ... In high school I learned Spanish, so I wanted to learn Portuguese. And I feel like having that background and that Spanish kind of set me up for a little bit of advance in this course.

Theresa Stern: Well, I wish you the very best of luck.

Brooke Coelho: Thank you.

Theresa Stern: And thanks for coming by and chatting with us today.

Brooke Coelho: Oh no problem. It was my pleasure. I just wanted to share that I'm so thankful to the puppy raisers and the trainers and everybody that is involved with Guide Dogs For The Blind. I don't think they understand fully when they get into it the difference they're making in people's lives. I think that they go into it thinking maybe it'll be a fun thing to raise a puppy. And yeah, you're doing a great thing in the process. I don't think they understand until maybe they see the person that is working with that guide dog that they raised, that the impact they're making on somebody's life is completely life changing. So I just wanted to say thank you again to everybody.

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