

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 this episode of Central Bark. Today, we're doing something a little different. It's our very first FAQ episode. Just to let you know, we had so many questions come in for this episode that we're actually going to be breaking up into two separate episodes. This first one will be for our guide dog program questions, and a future episode we will feature those puppy-raising questions that y'all sent in. Today, I am also super happy and super lucky to be joined by our guest, Jake Koch, who is our community outreach specialist here at Guide Dogs for the Blind. He will be talking to us a little bit about his experience with GDB as well as helping answer some of these frequently asked questions.

Welcome, Jake.

Jake Koch: Thanks, Teresa. Happy to be on the podcast.

Theresa Stern: Excellent. Excellent. How's your guide dog Forli doing today?

Jake Koch: She's doing very well. The weather here is a bit cooler, so, as a black lab, she enjoys that, and got in a lovely campus walk over lunch and is now happily sleeping under my desk.

Theresa Stern: Excellent. Excellent. All right. I love a good napping dog, that's for sure.

Jake Koch: Same.

Theresa Stern: Yes. Yes. So, Jake, tell us a little bit about your background and about the role that you have here at Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Jake Koch: Sure. I am visually impaired. I have a condition called bilateral microphthalmia. That means small, partially developed eyes. I have a little bit of central use of vision in one eye and light perception in the other. I grew up in Southeast Washington state near the Idaho-Washington border and grew up running a family owned business called Beamers Hells Canyon Tours, which gives guided jetboat tours of Hell's Canyon, North America's deepest river gorge.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Jake Koch: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: That is sounding very exciting. Oh my goodness.

Jake Koch: It was a very exciting childhood, and still part of the business today. It's one of my extracurricular activities. I've been a guide dog handler since 2008, and I'm currently working with my third guide dog, Forli, which is the name of an Italian

City, which is very fitting because one of my hobbies is to travel. I love travel, both for work, for pleasure. I'm one of those weird people that will get on an airplane and go wherever.

Theresa Stern: Great. We'll have to have you on sometime, and you can tell us what it was like to take Forli to Forli.

Jake Koch: Yeah. I guess I'm going to have to do that. That would be awesome.

My role at Guide Dogs for the Blind is community outreach specialist. I've been with the organization almost 10 years, and in my role I assist people who are blind or visually impaired with getting connected with our services along with blindness professionals. My job is to help people make that all-important informed choice about guide dog mobility. I support the admissions department with processing applications, the marketing department with some media relations work, and the fundraising department with service club and corporate relations. Very generous variety of work, which always keeps me on my toes, and I love variety, so there's never a dull day in the world of outreach.

Theresa Stern: Well, great. Now you can add being a guest on Central Bark to that long list of things that you do for your job. That's awesome.

Jake Koch: That's right.

Theresa Stern: Tell me, just briefly, before we get into these questions... I think folks would love to learn about how you decided to pursue the guide dog lifestyle. What made you decide to take the plunge?

Jake Koch: That's an excellent question. I had originally thought about a guide dog at the age of 16. My parents raised me to have an open mind and to consider all options and possibilities, so as I was learning orientation and mobility and to use the white cane, that was definitely an effective tool, but I also wanted to explore other options as well: low-vision devices along with having a guide dog. I determined at age 16 that I wasn't quite ready to have a guide dog in my life at that time for a variety of reasons. I lived in a pretty rural area, I didn't travel anywhere near what I do now, and maturity-wise just wasn't quite ready to take the leap.

Fast forward through freshman year of college, I reconsidered the idea of having a guide dog. I had moved to a city, commuting to and from college, I had a job, and things had changed a lot. I started thinking once again about what might a guide dog be able to help me with? How might it be a benefit in my life? How could it enhance my life? What are some of the challenges involved? Really, I focused a lot on what was involved in having a guide dog, asking people, calling guide dog schools, of course GDB, and I gathered probably enough information I could've written a 10-page term paper on. Unfortunately, there was one

semester where my 10-page term paper really didn't get written because I was so enthusiastic about studying what the guy dog lifestyle was all about.

Theresa Stern: Okay. We won't tell anyone that.

Jake Koch: That's right. Yeah. It was a big decision for me at age 19. How would this dog fit into my life? Was this really the right lifestyle? I learn by doing, so I eventually just decided to just give it a try and see what happened. It's been a good experience, I've learned a lot along the way, and, both socially and professionally, guide dogs have taken me a lot further than just down the sidewalk.

Theresa Stern: That's fantastic. Well, let's jump into some of these questions that came in over the last week or so. The first few have to do with folks who, sounds to me, are applying for a guide dog. One of them wants to know, "After I apply for a guide dog, how long will it take for me to be matched?" Can you give us some ideas on that, Jake?

Jake Koch: Absolutely. That's an excellent question; one that I answer often. The application process itself takes about 8-10 weeks. Pro tip: the faster you get all of your documentation into us and the quicker you are responding to our phone calls and interviews, the faster the process will move. After the application is completed, wait time right now at the time of recording hovers around 7-10 months.

Theresa Stern: Great. Great. Can you tell us, for those of us out there who might be waiting for a guide dog, they're on the wait list, they've gotten their application in, and they're just waiting for that call, what are some things that maybe someone can do while they're waiting to come in for a guide dog?

Jake Koch: Yeah. Yeah, that's an exciting time, maybe a nervous time, might feel like it's taking forever, so there's definitely some things you can do. I always recommend connecting with guide dog handlers via social media. There's a lot of different groups online. If you're able to attend, maybe, a National Federation of the Blind or an American Council of the Blind State or National Convention, that's another great opportunity to interact with the guide dog divisions of those two consumer organizations to really get a firsthand perspective. What are people saying? What do they like about having guide dogs? Sharing that you're applying oftentimes gets people really excited. It's a great way to network and to make some new friends; learn some tips; things like that. Of course, there are several YouTube channels out there that sort of profile life with a guide dog, so I'd encourage you to maybe take a look at those if you're into YouTube or into the more virtual-type experience just to keep yourself engaged.

In terms of maybe how to prepare physically, having a guide dog is a very purposeful type of travel. You're kind of walking more in a kind of utilitarian

fashion, meaning you're walking to get somewhere. You're going from up curb to down curb, and you're stopping as little in between as possible as the dog is avoiding obstacles and that sort of thing. It means that you may be using some muscles that you might not normally use when you're currently walking, so getting out there and walking maybe a bit more. If you feel comfortable, maybe walking at a bit of a faster pace if you have access to a track or something like that. That might help as well just to loosen things up.

Guide Dogs for the Blind has an excellent video on our YouTube channel called Gearing Up for GDB. It was put together by some physical therapy students in the Bay Area, and they give some excellent advice for some stretching and some exercises and things that you can do to alleviate those shin splints that you sometimes get while you're learning to travel with your guide dog in class, which are no fun.

Theresa Stern: Those are great suggestions, I think. Especially those ones about keeping physically fit and moving around, I think, are super important. When you get that new dog in your hands, get that leash in your hands, you need to be ready to roll. Right?

Jake Koch: Absolutely. It definitely helps. Coming from someone who's had three guy dogs myself, always stretch before you go out in the morning in class. It'll make your day a lot better.

Theresa Stern: All right. I've got a couple of questions now that are more on the guide dog training end of things. Can you tell us just a brief description of how are guide dogs trained?

Jake Koch: Sure. We have discovered here at Guide Dogs for the Blind that positive-reinforcement training is very effective with the dogs that we breed, raise and train. It allows the dogs to really enjoy what they do, be excited about the work, and allows the dogs to be trained more quickly. We use positive reinforcement in a few different ways. First of all, there's verbal and physical praise. So, "Good girl," or petting your dog at the corner. Then there's what I like to call edible praise. I think this is my-

Theresa Stern: That's my favorite kind of praise, Jake, I have to say.

Jake Koch: Same. My dog would also agree with you on that. Edible praise is essentially using a food reward. We use dog food that the dog would eat in its normal meal, and we take some of that food and put it in what we call a bait bag, which hangs off your hip. We're going to be rewarding the dogs for a variety of tasks that they complete. Maybe the dog has found the down curb at a street crossing, or maybe they've targeted a pole that has the walk button on it, et cetera, et cetera. We're really trying to pay them for the work that they're doing and really recognize that their work has value. We use positive reinforcement in that way.

We also use something called clicker training, which is a behavior-marking tool. Essentially, it comprises a clicker, a little box that makes a clicking sound, and then that's associated with food. We do that because it's a very consistent sound. Could say, "Good dog," a variety of different ways, deep voice, loud voice, soft voice, high voice, but a clicker sounds the same regardless: whether it gets wet, whether it's dry, loud, snow, rain, doesn't matter. By clicking, using the clicker, we can then be very precise about how we first train the dog, say, to target a curb or to find a bus stop in a person's neighborhood.

We also teach our clients how to use clicker training to customize their training, which I think is very exciting, and it makes our job a lot easier as well as the dog's job. Being able to teach the dog that this is a bus stop and this is something I'd like you to find... So we can actually name a command, and within about 20 to 30 feet from that, if I said to Forli, "Find the bus stop," and it was one that I had clicker trained her to find, she would be able to do that. Again, that's all thanks to the positive-reinforcement curriculum, r+, which is the version that we use here at Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. I have to say I love our newer training technique. It's really made a difference for me as a guide dog user too. My guide dog, Wills, can find bathrooms in just about any airport now, which is super handy.

Jake Koch: Oh. Good one.

Theresa Stern: Do need to get him to distinguish a little bit between the men's bathroom and the women's bathroom, but we'll get there.

Jake Koch: Ah.

Theresa Stern: Anyway. Well, very cool. Another training question: Somebody wrote in, and they asked, "What is with those little cute booties that I see your dogs working in sometimes?"

Jake Koch: Ah, yes. Dog booties. I'll tell you. If you're feeling a little lonely or maybe you don't feel like you got enough attention in your day, just put those four booties on your dog and walk them through a downtown area. You'll get all kinds of attention. Something about those shoes. People adore guide dogs to begin with, and that adorable-meter just goes up by about 10 fold.

Theresa Stern: I think you're right. Yeah. What's the purpose of those crazy things?

Jake Koch: Apart from being cute, they do serve a very important purpose in a few different ways. We use the dog shoes or booties when the temperature climbs 90, 95, 100 degrees because the pavement and other walking surfaces outside can be very hot and can burn the dog's pads. Many of our graduates live in places where it's hot a lot of the year. Think the Southwest, the South, different areas of the country where they need to continue to travel. By putting those

shoes on, that protects the dog's feet from the hot surfaces that they may be encountering.

We also use them in cold, snowy and salty conditions. Oftentimes, maybe in the Midwest, the East Coast, up in Alaska, et cetera, they're going to be using a lot of salt and deicing agent to keep the sidewalk safe to walk on, but that stuff can be very toxic to a dog. It can irritate their feet and their pads, so we also use the booties in those types of environments as well to protect them from those chemicals. It does wonders in terms of being able to remain independent when the weather maybe isn't so great.

We also use them in one other place, kind of a unique environment, and that is with escalator travel. Our dogs are trained to ride on escalators, which I think is very impressive. Trying to explain a moving staircase to a dog must be quite an undertaking, but we do it. We put them on the dog's back feet, and that protects the dog's feet as they board and deboard the escalator. As those parts are moving and folding and unfolding, we wouldn't want their feet to get caught, so we put them on there as well to protect them in that environment.

Theresa Stern: Well, that makes a lot of sense. Do you know, how do they train these dogs to wear shoes?

Jake Koch: Yeah, it's pretty comical to watch. We start pretty simply, maybe with one or two at a time, and put the shoes on. Then, we go have fun. We take the dogs down to our very nice play yards on campus, and we play their favorite game. Maybe it's tug. Maybe it's the ball. All kinds of ways to just get the dogs excited and to sort of forget that there's anything on their feet. The thing about labs of golden retrievers is they love people, they love interaction, and they also really enjoy playing a favorite game, so if we can get them to be positive and to do something positive, that will make the experience a lot easier. We might do that session and then take the shoes back off after a few minutes, and then try again.

We might also use food and/or the clicker. I can put a shoe on, click and feed, put another shoe on, click and feed. "Wow, good dog," making it really positive. Then, once they get comfortable, then we might try to work maybe a short campus route and then eventually take the dogs into town, and work them on some actual routes, and just be normal: feeding them, rewarding them, praising them, getting them to move forward and to travel while wearing the shoes. After a while, it becomes so just sort of like, "Oh, okay. I'm wearing these things. Yeah, maybe it's not really my favorite thing, but also I'm getting fed, I'm getting played with, I'm getting praised, and so you know what? I really don't care anymore."

Theresa Stern: That's right. "Everybody says I'm adorable with my little red tennis shoes on," right?

Jake Koch: Exactly. "I'm getting all the people looking at me. Life's good."

Theresa Stern: That's excellent. It is funny too. I have seen dogs just learning to wear the booties, and it is pretty funny at first. They're like, "I don't know if I can even move with this on." Then, you give them something that they like, like you said, a toy or a cookie, and they just go, "Oh, okay. Nevermind. I'm good." They're very resilient, our dogs.

Jake, here's a good question. This comes from somebody who's a guide dog user, and they're wanting to know if, for some reason, they're not able to work their guide dog for a while, maybe they have a knee surgery or some other situation comes up, how does that work?

Jake Koch: First, I want to start by saying that dogs are very resilient and flexible creatures. I wish I was that resilient. They're just amazing. They can be hanging out at home one day and going across the country the next, it seems like, and they are very good about that. Certainly, something like an extended period of time where someone may not be able to work with their guide dog, that can create some challenge. In that instance, this is where our wonderful follow-up services can be really helpful. We would recommend contacting our support center; speaking to them about a plan of instruction.

Sometimes what happens is maybe the dog may come back for a little extra training just to maintain. Maybe less of training but more maintaining their skillsets to preserve those for you while you're unable to work with your dog. That's kind of a more extreme case, but in the instance of maybe it's just a little time, a couple of weeks, when you resume guide work, taking it slow, doing some easy, simple routes, and being a little bit flexible with the dog's needs and being aware of their comfort level. It's like getting back from a vacation. If you get back and you've got a mountain of high-stress work to do, that's going to feel very overwhelming, as opposed to coming back and maybe, "Let's start with the-

Theresa Stern: I just did that, Jake. You're right.

Jake Koch: Ah. Yes. Right.

Theresa Stern: Ease is.

Jake Koch: So maybe start with emails at the top of the list.

Theresa Stern: I love it. I love it. Thank you. Here's kind of a silly question, and I don't know if you have an answer to it, but it'll be interesting to see what you come up with, Jake. What is your favorite guide dog puppy name?

Jake Koch: Oh, that is an excellent question.

Theresa Stern: That's funny. Just as we asked that question, I heard Forli get up and shake.

Jake Koch: I think Forli has an opinion. I think the name is Forli.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Jake Koch: That's what she's trying to tell me. That's her favorite name.

Theresa Stern: That's funny. That's funny. It is funny, though, the names. I think names are important. I think people and dogs, they kind of grow into their names, so I think when we're doing naming at Guide Dogs, we're always a little bit... we try to be very careful about what we name our dogs. I remember my mom, when she was growing up, she had a dog named Mischief. I don't think we would probably name a dog Mischief to become a guide dog. We wouldn't want them to necessarily do that.

Jake Koch: That may not be ideal, for sure. Yeah.

Theresa Stern: That's right. That's right.

Jake Koch: Yes.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness. This is a great one: Tell me the funniest thing that one of your guide dogs has done that just makes you laugh.

Jake Koch: I'm laughing already. There are so many. Oh my gosh. My first guide dog was a female yellow Labrador named Summer. She was like, "Get up and get going, and you better hang onto this harness handle or you're going to be left in the dust," kind of a dog. Very alpha-minded female yellow Labrador. Wonderful dog. I was visiting some family, and they had a screen door and a backyard. I went to get the dog and let her out. I woke her up, she was in her crate or something, so opened up the crate, went to let her outside, and she runs down the hallway and didn't realize that there was a screen door there and ran right through it.

The screen door goes flying, and it was like slow motion, everybody said. She just blasts through the screen. The screen door goes flying. She was completely unfazed by it; had no idea what she had done. All to go out and play and run. She was like, "Oh, what do you mean I just ran through your screen door?" That was the vibe that I got from her.

Theresa Stern: That is funny. It makes me think of one of those cartoons, and it would say, "Pow," or something or whatever.

Jake Koch: Yes.

Theresa Stern: Like a Spider-Man cartoon or something. That's hysterical. She wasn't hurt, so that's good too.

Jake Koch: That's right. She was not hurt at all. Fortunately, there's no harm done, and she didn't know the wiser.

Theresa Stern: I love it. I love it. You know what? I think people forget sometimes that guide dogs are dogs first, so they do dog stuff. I think it's always good for us to all remember that.

Jake Koch: Absolutely. There's a saying that I like to say, and that is, "Can put the guide into the dog, but you can't take the dog out of the guide."

Theresa Stern: I like that. That's perfect. That's perfect. All right. Now, another one of our listeners asks if you have to be totally blind to use a guide dog.

Jake Koch: Excellent question. We get this one a lot. You do not have to be totally blind to travel with a guide dog or to qualify for one through Guide Dogs for the Blind. We ask that people are declared legally blind, which is a government-issued low-vision threshold.

Theresa Stern: That's great. We've also made, I know, some exceptions recently for folks who have what's called cortical blindness where the actual health of your eye is fine. It has more to do with the connection between your brain and your vision, so you might not test as visually impaired, but you are still unable to see. You may need a white cane or a guide dog in order to get around safely.

Jake Koch: Yeah, that's right. If you have any questions about that, if you're thinking about a guide dog and you're not sure, maybe you've gotten that legal-blindness test, but you do use a white cane or you do have a visual impairment, always give us a call. We do handle our applications on a case-by-case basis-

Theresa Stern: That's right.

Jake Koch: ... and we really try to look holistically at the applicant and what you need. So don't hesitate to give us a call, our admissions department; our outreach department. We can walk you through some of that and help best advise you on what might be a good fit for you.

Theresa Stern: All right. How old does someone need to be to get a guide dog? Is there someone that's too old to have a guide dog?

Jake Koch: Guide Dogs for the Blind does not have posted lower or upper age limits. We have graduates from 13 to roughly 95 years of age who have received guide dogs and been successful. There are some things to keep in mind. We do look at applicants holistically. Apart from the interest in having a guide dog, we look at what we call guide dog readiness. Does somebody possess the emotional skills

to take care of a living being? They are dogs, after all. They do require feeding, watering, relieving, grooming, vet visits, and all the animal care that comes along with having an animal in the home. So we want to make sure that if somebody's on the younger side of that, that there's a support system in place for them to be able to be successful.

We're also looking at the need in a guide dog; the mobility aspects. Are people traveling to at least three destinations outside the home? We really want to make sure that these dogs have an opportunity to work regularly. That will preserve their skills [inaudible 00:23:38] a better guide dog overall. Looking at does somebody have the necessary travel to facilitate good, and positive, and healthy guide dog work?

If somebody maybe isn't ready for a guide dog, a great time to start thinking about a guide dog is around 13-15 years of age, keeping these other aspects of guide dog readiness in mind. To help with that, Guide Dogs for the Blind does have a variety of youth programs available to assist with helping someone determine whether the guide dog lifestyle may be for them and what's involved in having a guide dog, especially at a younger age.

Theresa Stern: All right. Great. Then, this question came in, Jake. Folks are wondering why we don't have more facilities, guide dog facilities, around the US and Canada. We have our two campuses, obviously, in California and Oregon, but do you want to talk a little bit about how we serve all of the US and Canada just from those two campuses?

Jake Koch: Sure. That's another excellent question. Why not more facilities? Well, the way that our program is structured, we are able to serve people throughout the entire US and Canada from our two campuses in California and in Oregon. We do that through a whole network of people: puppy raisers who are raising our dogs out in the 10 western states along with our support staff. A lot of what we can do, especially after folks graduate from our programs, is we have a extensive suite of follow-up services, including a support center. Think tech support for guide dogs. You can call in; ask any question. It's staffed by guide dog mobility instructors, guide dog handlers, and veterinary professionals.

Theresa Stern: Mm-hmm.

Jake Koch: Yeah, it's amazing.

Theresa Stern: It's amazing.

Jake Koch: We can use our partnership with Be My Eyes, which is a video assistance app for anything related to the guide dog lifestyle. We can also send somebody out to your home from our two campuses to assist. We have regionally based guide dog mobility instructors that serve various geographical zones in the country. While we may not have physical campuses in every city in this great nation and

in Canada, we do have a presence out in the community. We have all of those supports and services that I mentioned. We also provide all our services free of charge, including transportation from your home to our campus and back again. Very easy to get you from your home to our campus for training. We can also offer an in-home training option if you are unable to attend class for a variety of reasons. We can talk to you about that while applying.

Theresa Stern: Our last question: What breeds of dogs Guide Dogs for the Blind uses and why.

Jake Koch: Absolutely. Guide Dogs for the Blind breeds are own stock of Labradors, golden retrievers, and a golden retriever-Labrador cross breed. We use these three breeds in particular because they produce the highest success rate. As an organization that is a nonprofit charitable organization that receives no government funding, we want to be responsible and ethical breeders of the dogs that we create. We also want to be very responsible and ethical with the resources that we're given by our wonderful donor community, and so we are looking for dog breeds that are going to produce the highest success rate. For us, those are Labs, and golden retrievers, and the Labrador-golden retriever cross breed.

Theresa Stern: So, no Chihuahuas anytime soon, I guess.

Jake Koch: No guide Chihuahuas. I think they'd be pretty small, and they'd have to have some pretty strong legs to keep up.

Theresa Stern: I think you're right. I think you're right. It might be hard to keep them quiet in a movie theater. Just saying. [inaudible 00:27:15].

Jake Koch: Ah, yes. I think you're right about that.

Theresa Stern: Can you tell us a little bit about how this wonderful organization is funded? Are there any fees for our services? Anything else like that that you can key us in on?

Jake Koch: Yes. Guide Dogs for the Blind provides all of its services free of charge. Some examples of this include transportation to and from class, the dog, its instruction, your instruction, and lifetime follow-up support. We are solely supported by private and corporate gifts and receive no government funding, so we rely heavily on our donor base to provide all of the funds and resources necessary to keep our organization strong and healthy. We've been around for 80 years, and we hope to be around for at least another 80 years. We're very excited about what we've done, what we're doing, and what we hope to do in the future.

Theresa Stern: That's great, Jake. Hey, I want to thank you so much for stopping by Central Bark today. Give Forli a big snuggle from me, and hopefully we'll have you back on soon.

This transcript was exported on Sep 30, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Jake Koch: Yes. Thank you so much for this opportunity. Happy to stop by, and Forli is already enjoying the pet from you.

Theresa Stern: Excellent.

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