Theresa Stern:

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

Hello everyone and welcome to Central Bark. Today we've got a great show for you. We're going to be talking about one of our newer programs at Guide Dogs for the Blind that really makes quite an impact on youth who are experiencing blindness. And my guests today are Jane Flower, who's our youth outreach specialist at Guide Dogs for the Blind. And Richard Rueda from APH Connect and he is their assistant director. Welcome the two of you.

Richard Rueda:

Thank you, Theresa.

Jane Flower:

Yeah. Thanks Theresa. Happy to be here.

Theresa Stern:

Absolutely. So Richard, tell us just a little bit about you and your role at APH.

Richard Rueda:

Theresa and thank you. I am the assistant director with the American Printing House for the Blind Connect Center, which is a group of websites and resources that we have built over the past six years having inherited it from the American Foundation for the Blind. So I work with a team of eight managing resources and working with partners like Guide Dogs for the Blind to make the world a better place and more informed place for people who are blind and low vision. My background is in rehabilitation and counseling and I bring that 25 years of work experience to APH having been on board for four years now.

Theresa Stern:

That's awesome. And what an important work that you all are doing there for all of us who are visually impaired. Thank you. And Ms. Jane, let's start off with a question for you. So Jane, can you tell us a little bit about our partnership with APH, about the program that you all are doing together and how that program really connects with the rest of the youth services that we're offering right now?

Jane Flower:

Sure. Thanks, Theresa. Yeah, we're really excited. This is the second summer we are collaborating with the APH Connect Center, Career Connect and the program is called Careers and Canine Connections.

Theresa Stern:

I love that.

Jane Flower:

Careers and Canine Connections. Yeah. So the collaboration between APH Career Connect and our Guide Dogs for the Blind, Careers and Canine Connections program came about because we thought it would be really interesting to bring together these two programs. So youth ages 18 to 24 who are in that transition age seeking employment, beginning to think about their careers, and then also thinking about their mobility as they head out into the world and leave home and all of that. And so how are they going to get around either using a cane or a guide dog? And having a working dog and a career, how those two things tie together. And there's a lot that goes into obviously, working and living with a guide dog and just having your career and how those things come together.

Theresa Stern:

I think it's true. I mean, I think there's so many similarities of skills that you need, both to work successfully with a guide dog that kind of transfer to those adult living skills of being on time and taking care of something other than you, having to go out when you don't want to, all that kind of stuff. But Richard, can you tell us a little bit about why these types of programs are so important for our blindness community?

Richard Rueda:

Well, yes, and I want to say first off that I consider Careers and Canine Connections a deep dive into adulting in a fun and safe setting. So if you're 18 or 20 or 24 and you're wondering why is it for me? Because you're going to have a lot of fun and you're going to be educated at the same time. You'll get to experience what working with a dog is like for a day or an overnight and learn a little bit about what are the ins and outs of interviewing. I think these programs are important because they address the critical needs of what we want for our young adults to receive, to be prepared to be equal footing when they go to college, when they get their first job and they have the confidence and independence that they need to be self-sufficient in the world. These programs didn't exist when you, Jane and I were young.

Theresa Stern:

That's for sure.

Richard Rueda:

They were just beach trips and fun and we survived, but so many people don't get that equity and we moved away from the idea that the unemployment rate is over 70%. What we say now in studies and research have shown this, is that the unemployment rate of working age adults 18 to 64 is three times the amount of what it is at the national level for people who are not disabled. So still staggering and we want to break that down so every opportunity we can give to young people who want to meet us halfway, we're willing to be there and prepare them.

Theresa Stern:

That's fantastic. I love it. So Jane, what can folks who might decide to apply to this program, can you tell us a little bit about what kind of offerings they'll be experiencing when they come?

Jane Flower:

Yeah. I'll give you some details about when it's happening first.

Theresa Stern:

Yeah, that would be great. Yeah.

Jane Flower:

So the program is going to be happening this summer. The dates are August 9th through the 14th and we hold it up in Oregon at the Hull Park Center for the Blind. It's just outside of Portland and it's right near our Guide Dogs for the Blind campus up there.

Theresa Stern:

I've heard that's a fabulous place.

Jane Flower:

It is.

Theresa Stern:

I've heard just such great things about it.

Jane Flower:

Yeah.

Richard Rueda:

It's amazing.

Jane Flower:

It's so great. It's the perfect location for our programs for the youth. It's got all the things that we love to do with our youth that come through there. And there's a campfire circle, there's a pool, there's great hiking trails, all the things that we can just have some fun as well as educational programs. And so this program is a week long. It is free for youth ages 18 to 24. The application is available now on our website at guidedogs.com. Under client programs, you'll find youth programs, it's there and applications are due April 1st.

Theresa Stern:

All right. So we need to get moving on that.

Jane Flower:

We need to get moving on that and we're really excited to see who applies and who's going to come join us this summer.

Theresa Stern:

That's great. And how is it, so people go, okay, well there's Camp GDB, and then there's this other program, there's Career Canine Connect program and what's sort the difference, so if people are kind of trying to decide what's the best one for them.

Jane Flower:

Yeah. Well, and Camp GDB is for youth 14 to 17.

Theresa Stern:

Oh, okay. Well that kind of makes it easy. Yeah.

Jane Flower:

That kind makes makes a decision for people. But just for people's reference Camp GDB is, it's all about learning about what it's like to live and work with a guide dog. And then of course all the camp fun tied in throughout that program as well. And so all the really cool hands-on experiences with dogs, they get to experience a dog walk, a live dog walk with a guide dog and harness, and then everyone gets a really cool overnight experience where they get to have a dog with them overnight and learn to take care of all the dog's needs, feeding, water and relieving, picking up after the dog, which is huge part of just-

Theresa Stern:

And cuddling. Don't forget-

Jane Flower:

And cuddling. Don't forget the cuddling. Yes.

Theresa Stern:

The cuddling.

Jane Flower:

Is the key, right, Richard?

Richard Rueda:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Jane Flower:

The cuddling, the brushing, all the things that go into just taking care of a dog. And then Careers and Canine Connections, they still get all that same cool hands-on experiences with the dog, but it's a much more adult program. We're having a lot of really cool discussions around career exploration and then some networking things, some mentorships discussions. They get to interview people who are blind or have low vision that have really cool jobs. And then we tie in some of the fun stuff too in terms of a campfire and swimming and all those things. But it's a great program and the collaboration with APH has been awesome and Richard and along with Laurie are just, his coworker that helps with the program, are just a wealth of knowledge. And so it's just been great. We're really excited.

Richard Rueda:

And I want to add that to underscore what you said, Jane, is a lot of what we see in Career and Canine Connections is all that curriculum, but it's also role modeling. You've got people like Jake, Jane, myself and other staff we come across throughout the week who are guide dog users who are blind professionals. And I think that's important and it's missing in many programs I've been a part of in the past. So I think this is kind of a feather in our cap, if you will.

Theresa Stern:

Yeah, no, I agree. And I think when I was growing up as a kid who's blind, I didn't really know any other blind people until I went to a specialized camp for blind kids. And that meant so much to me, just meeting other people who are visually impaired. That's a fairly low incidence disability. So did you find that true as well with this program? Just the connections that the campers made with one another?

Richard Rueda:

Yes.

Jane Flower:

Absolutely. Yeah, they really do. And I think that's one of the most unique parts and beneficial parts, at least for the participants. Like you said, we have so many kids and youth that come through our programs that they might be the only one in their school or hometown that's vision impaired. And I hear that more and more. And we do require that they, as part of the application process, that they write an essay as to why they want to attend the program. And one of the things I hear more often is, and I get to meet other kids like me.

Theresa Stern:

Yeah. It's so important.

Jane Flower:

It's super important.

Theresa Stern:

It's so important to have your tribe, right, as everybody talks about. Yeah, absolutely. So are there any particular things that stood out from last year as just amazing memories for either one of you?

Richard Rueda:

I think we had some individuals who came in were kind of shrugging it off as a prison sentence and weren't sure if they should be there. And by day four, day three, they were helping out, empowered and felt like they belonged and it was a place where they haven't belonged in the past and now they belonged and they were just so excited. And I think you know who we're talking about, Jane and this young man was just impressive all around.

Theresa Stern:

I love it. I love it.

Jane Flower:

Yeah. And also stepping in because we had another young gentleman that participated that needed some extra assistance and some guidance a little bit and they just kind of, the two young gentlemen that attended just rallied around him and just kind of took him under his wing and helped him because we do have them do some fun assignments and discussions and yeah, it was nice to see. It's nice to see that.

Theresa Stern:

Right. To see them really supporting each other.

Richard Rueda:

Organic, non-patronizing way and that makes you want to cry. It was just awesome.

Jane Flower:

Exactly.

Theresa Stern:

Oh, I love it. And a super important skill, right?

Richard Rueda:

Yes.

Jane Flower:

Absolutely.

Theresa Stern:

For people to have in the workplace, in life all around. That's great. So what are you most looking forward to this year? Are there any sort of new activities or anything you want to tell us about specific to what you're looking forward to in this next session?

Richard Rueda:

I think, I mean right now as we record this, we're literally in the planning process and we're looking back on what worked and what could we do better? And as we roll out the new agenda, there'll be a lot of similarities and there'll, there'll be new things that will improve upon going, "Hey, we did this in 90 minutes, maybe we can do it in 75 minutes." Because it's summer and we want them to have fun, but we want them to learn. So it's a balancing act. How much time do you have in the pool? How much time do you have with learning about dog etiquette and then learning about interviewing practices and then merging that. So I think it's just ironing out those things. But other than that, I think we had a pretty good pilot program and we're just going to perfect it from there.

Theresa Stern:

Yeah. That sounds great.

Jane Flower:

Definitely. And I'm just excited to see who applies and just take them under our wing again and see the improvements from last year. I love when you start a new program and you just see it grow and improve year after year.

Theresa Stern:

Absolutely.

Jane Flower:

Like Richard said, last year was our first time, so we learned a lot and there were some great things and we're just looking forward to improving those.

Theresa Stern:

So, I think that I need to come up this time. This sounds like so much fun. I want to come up.

Jane Flower:

You're retired. Are you looking for work? Are you needing a career and canine connection?

Theresa Stern:

Exactly. Always. Always. And s'mores. Will there be s'mores?

Jane Flower:

We try, yes. Every year, yes.

Theresa Stern:

Okay, good.

Jane Flower:

Sometimes we can't have a campfire because of fire stuff, but so we get out of little stove, we make it happen.

Theresa Stern:

Okay.

Jane Flower:

However.

Theresa Stern:

Well, you might just see me on the doorstep this time.

Jane Flower:

Okay. You are welcome.

Theresa Stern:

That sounds like...

Richard Rueda:

Every time we tour a Guide Dog campus and especially the GDB campus up in Oregon, it was neat to see everyone just empowered and go, "Wow, this is great." Because it's tangible now that they're not just at the Hull Center, but they're at the facility and they get to see the inner workings of a guide dog facility. It's empowering. And then we went into the residence and we saw that map that's an interactive map and people were just rallying around that. And you see people light up, you see the light bulbs turn on and it's just, it's outstanding.

Jane Flower:

I think one other really cool part too, if I can, is as part of last year's program, we had set up informational interviews for the kids to interview different staff at Guide Dogs. And I think it was awesome for the staff because a lot of times the staff at Guide Dogs, because of just their role, they're not always interacting with our clients.

Theresa Stern:

That's true.

Jane Flower:

And so they really got to sit and talk. And I remember, I think it was one of our, I can't remember her name who said it, but just that was her takeaway was the informational interview she had with the participant. She said she didn't know what to expect and she was a little nervous and she said it was awesome and she loved that. So even the staff is getting something out of the interaction with the participants as well.

Theresa Stern:

No, I love that. I think it's true. I think people think about a guide dog school and they think, "Oh, it's all guide dog trainers," or whatever, but there's accountants and human resources and maintenance and...

Jane Flower:

It's an organization. We have everybody.

Theresa Stern:

Yeah, yeah. We have it all. It's a little microcosm. So it's really, it is a great opportunity for kids to see those jobs and then like you said, for our staff to interact more with our clients. And I just love how this program really fits in so nicely with our goal to serve people more broadly throughout their lifetime. And I really want to congratulate both you, Richard and Jane, for putting together this amazing program that I wish I had when I was a kid. And so thank you so much. And thank you for coming by Central Bark and letting us know about it.

Richard Rueda:

My pleasure. Thank you.

Jane Flower:

Yeah, thanks for having us.

Theresa Stern:

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