Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Theresa Stern, and I'm your host. Well, hello everyone, and welcome to Central Bark. Today we are joined by a really, really cool and interesting guest.

He is a Canadian Paralympic athlete, a JEDI brand strategist (we're going to learn more about that), a counselor, and of course, one of our amazing Guide Dogs for the Blind community members. His name is Ness Murby. And he's going to tell us a little bit today about prepping for the 2024 Olympics in Paris (hello, Paris), and a little bit about some of the barriers that he's navigating and taking down for the future for other people, and about his family life. So, welcome, Ness.

Ness Murby: Thanks so much. I really appreciate having the opportunity to be here and have a bit of a chat, so let's get started.

Theresa Stern: Awesome. I love it. I love it. Ness, you have such an amazing background, but tell us a little bit about how you became part of the Guide Dogs for the Blind community.

Ness Murby: Yeah. Let me think. Wow. Okay, that was a ways back. So I just had this moment where I realized that Lexington, my recently retired guide dog from Guide Dogs for the Blind, is actually approaching 12.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Okay.

Ness Murby: Yeah. So I realized that when I connected with Guide Dogs for the Blind, it was back in 2012. I recently had my former guide dog retired. And my former guide dog was a seeing-eye dog from Australia, a chocolate lab.

And I was in Canada at the time and needing to find a new guide dog school. And what was amazing is that Guide Dogs for the Blind really met me where I was at and said, "Hey, how can we help this transition be smoother?" Because I'd been without a working guide dog for a year, and that was an unexpected retirement.

So I was really struggling to find my sense of independence again in the way that I had been so used to it. So Guide Dogs reached out and said, "Let us work with you. And we work with clients internationally. We can bring you in to have a look at our school." And really just showed up for me. So that was where history began.

Theresa Stern: Nice. Wow. So it's been a minute then. You've been with us for... So you had a dog from Australia. Obviously, with your accent, are you from Australia, Ness, originally?

Ness Murby: Yes. So I'm Australian-born, mixed race, white-passing, and a grateful settler on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish people.

Theresa Stern: Great. Great. Great. Tell me a little bit... I know you're a Paralympian, but I don't know much more. Tell me about some of these amazing accomplishments you've had in athletics.

Ness Murby: My sporting career started in Australia, where I represented Australia in goalball. And in fact, I've represented three countries in three power sports; Australia, Japan, and Canada in goalball, powerlifting, and para-athletics.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Ness Murby: Yeah. I hold world records, world continental, and national titles. And in 2020, I came out as trans. And in 2022, I made history competing in the men's division and becoming world-ranked.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Ness Murby: I think what's really interesting for me, when we think about sport, there's often this narrative where we assume that someone who is in an elite sport has been born into it, dreamt about it, lived it, and breathed into it.

And for me, sport specifically was a place where I found an avenue for being my authentic self. So doing things such as goalball and powerlifting, it really helped me with my gender dysphoria and having control of my body.

But interestingly, when I converted into elite sport, because para-athletics is in the Paralympics and there's that narrative that the end goal is to reach the Paralympics standard and to be present there, wearing a nation's flag and emblem. And what was interesting for me is that when I think of para-athletics, it's not just one thing. It was actually that being an elite sport, it's potentially not the narrative that most people assume, but being part of Team Canada is a credit to my athleticism, but it's also been rooted in fighting ableism.

Theresa Stern: Right.

Ness Murby: And to that extent, it was fighting ableism in the form of discrimination and my ability to get work in Canada. So holding multiple truths, having a stipend as a Paralympian, which is a small stipend for living and training, was a way that I could contribute to my family.

And so it's not just one thing. Yes, I am good at what I do, and I work hard to be an elite athlete. But also, I'm fighting ableism because I was unable to obtain paid employment in Canada.

Theresa Stern: Yes. Yes. For so many of us who are experiencing vision loss, just the struggle to find employment and for people to get over their bias as to what a blind person can or can't do is difficult.

It's interesting to me and ironic that you are then doing such a physical sport when the disability was a barrier in getting employment, but here you are doing this badass physical sports stuff. It is ironic. And I do think that not only... You were talking about how the sport has really helped you so much. I think it does help so many other people because I do think it does start to change the narrative around what a person who's visually impaired can and can't do.

Ness Murby: Certainly. I think also when we look to Paralympians, there's this idea of challenging the stereotype of what can and cannot be possible. On the other hand, there's always multiple truths. And there's this idea that we're creating inspirational pedestalling of people with disabilities. And not everyone has the ability to be a Paralympian.

Theresa Stern: Correct.

Ness Murby: And so working out that gray space. And I think that's why, for me, it's been so important to move into the JEDI space, which is the justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion space where I work now full-time. I have full-time employment in that space to actually help organizations start to work out a culture of authentic inclusion so that they can actually help foster belonging.

And so I work with organizations to really identify where inequities exist for equity-deserving folks and communities. And so to really challenge those stereotypes and move away from the default lens of what we think is possible or the way that we've always done things.

Because there's always that idea of, well, we've always done it this way, so we should continue. But we don't consider, with intentionality, who's being included and who's being excluded.

And then there's this added idea that we start to associate inclusion as including everybody. And it's impossible to include everyone, but what we do need to do is come back to that intentionality of who are we including, why are we including these individuals, and who's being excluded and taking accountability. And so I think when I look to Para Sport, for me, it's a privileged platform to actually be able to make and contribute to change in the systems that I operate in.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. I think, like you said, there is such a tendency to go on this inspirational porn or whatever we're calling it these days, rather than people just seeing people as people. So I appreciate you pointing that out. I think it's important.

And I also love that you pointed out that we are often excluding people without even realizing it, if we don't take the time to really think about what we're saying and what we're doing and how influential even language is.

Ness Murby: So much. Yeah. I think operating even just in the sports space and working out who's showing up and what each person is capable of, and also when we look at culture, that plays a role in this. As a Paralympian, being sent to different cultures and different geographical locations has an impact on how I'm received and also how I'm able to integrate.

And I think that's something that we as a society need to spend more time on, rather than assuming that the way that we see the world is the only way it should be seen.

Theresa Stern: Correct. Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So you talked a little bit about your journey, your trans journey. And I know that you've been really public and helping other folks with that, with navigating the whole sports industry as well. In that realm, that's such the topic right now.

And I believe there was a documentary that you participated in. Can you tell us a little bit about that and about how that felt to really be able to share with the community?

Ness Murby: Well, if anyone's seen The Matrix, good old '90s, I definitely hear the voice, "Why, oh why didn't I take the blue pill?"

Theresa Stern: I love it.

Ness Murby: And to those who have not seen The Matrix, it's basically the idea of we had two options to do or not do, and the blue pill would be the not doing. But at some point, in all sincerity, I had to reconcile that whilst this story... it's not mine alone. And it's really important to have as a story out there.

I think I've been journeying uncomfortable most of my life. Trans and queer and blind. Showing up has really been this intersectionality in itself of where my identities get edited and spaces are inherently unsafe, depending on where the acceptance sits in a space. So I've had to be my own representation. Visibility can be lifesaving.

So when we think about this documentary, well, we were approached to make this documentary, and not something that I had foreseen happening. But as the first openly trans Paralympian man in competition, I guess I'd describe it as feeling compelled.

I was compelled to show up in all of my imperfect and human, let me own that first, and my vulnerability hangovers on the daily, to use what I said before, my platform, that is a platform of privilege. Because I really wanted to try and I guess contribute something to a legacy where the next person might not feel as isolated.

Ness Murby Transcending is my story. I didn't have autonomy over how it was told, but yet I know that it's a story that needed to be told. And for me, the message comes down to human. I'm a dad. I'm a husband. I drink coffee in the morning, tea all day long, and I'm trans. There are a lot of us out there.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely.

Ness Murby: And so that message being, I think, at the end, if there's one thing that I could hope for is that the message is, I'm trans. There are a lot of us out there. You're not alone. We're here. We always have been here and will continue to be here as trans humans.

And if just one person saw this and felt this, that's what it was all about. And I am honored to say that that has already happened.

Theresa Stern: Oh, wonderful.

Ness Murby: I'm grateful to have been able to put myself out there.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Well, we are grateful for you doing that as well. Like you said, I think it takes a lot of courage. And I imagine it was a hassle having been filmed so much as well.

Ness Murby: I think it was a step outside of that comfort zone, even though I journeyed uncomfortable. 300 hours of filming went into that. It was 30 10-hour days.

Theresa Stern: Oh my God. Yes.

Ness Murby: I think that's also part of this. When I talk about the assumptions that we make and we bring forward, often... I've watched shows on telly and I have no idea what's gone into them.

And recognizing that it's not just the people on the credits, it's not just the people who you see on the screen. It's the people behind the scenes. It's those that are in the background as well as those that are in production and post-production that put something together. So a lot of humans went into this.

Theresa Stern: Yes. Yes. Yes. Right. And I'm sure your family as well, thus everybody. Yeah. No, it's true.

Ness Murby: Yeah. Yeah. And certainly, that was something. You mentioned my family going into this. And that was a conversation that we had to have with a lot of intentionality of how do we feel about showing up and how are we going to journey this and manage to self-regulate with being so public?

Because I think of myself now as the title of introverted advocate. It's easier to advocate on behalf of others showing up in a space as myself. And then my spouse also identifies as introverted. And so navigating that space was a challenge that was something that we had to be intentional about.

Similarly so, with our kiddo, when we thought about how do we do this when we've got our kiddo involved, and what are the choices we're making and the potential impact? And something that we said is, well, we want to show our kid that we were willing to put ourselves into discomfort to send a message of it's okay to be who you are and to be imperfect. And that's the best we could do.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Well, that's an amazing gift for a kiddo, I think, to get, that everything has to be perfect all the time. Nothing ever will be except for being your authentic self. So how old is your kiddo?

Ness Murby: Zeb just turned two in April.

Theresa Stern: Oh, he's a little one.

Ness Murby: Oh, yeah.

Theresa Stern: Oh, congratulations. Oh my goodness.

Ness Murby: Yeah. It's amazing how fast they grow, and yet... Someone said to me, the days are long and the years are fast.

Theresa Stern: That's so true, right? Yeah.

Ness Murby: Yes. It's right on with the description. The days are very long.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, no kidding. I was going to say a little two-year-old running around, plus all of your training you have to do. Oh my goodness.

Ness Murby: From the beginning, Zeb has been at every training session and every competition. And Eva, my spouse, has had to also take on multiple roles. So it wasn't until about I think actually this week [inaudible 00:15:49].

This week was the first time we went to training without Zeb. And I'm going to say it was the most awkward, uncomfortable space we were in.

Theresa Stern: Really?

Ness Murby: It's funny. Eva and I had our first date at Zeb being 23 months old.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness.

Ness Murby: And we were like, "We've got that covered." Because we don't have people supporting us through the journey before that.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Ness Murby: It was interesting that showing up to training was the one where it really landed for us. We were like, "Whoa. Zed's not with us."

Theresa Stern: Like, "This feels weird."

Ness Murby: Yeah. Anyway, so I had to get us-

Theresa Stern: "We're missing something."

Ness Murby: Yep.

Theresa Stern: Well, that's how I feel sometimes when I don't have my guide dog with me. I'll be talking to him. And he's like, "Theresa, he's not there. You have your cane." [inaudible 00:16:35]. So I get it.

Ness Murby: And actually, as I load up the car, I turned to Zeb, I'm like, "You right there, sweetie? We got you buckled?" And then I turned to say to Lex, "All right, you're good, mate?" And realized Lex is retired and he's not in the car.

And that was sort of a... okay, still journeying that. And I think I'm grateful that now I can say that and laugh because the act of retiring a guide dog, potentially, this is... It's heavy but I'm not afraid to go there because I think we should, which is the act of retiring a guide dog, the end-of-life conversations around a guide dog. I've dealt with both.

And I would say that, for me, really recognizing that as a handler, this is my ability to show up for my dog who wants nothing more than to put his head in the harness and work. And so I think that's what comforts me anytime that it's hard is trying to have that conversation of this is me showing up for Lexington when it's hard for me because he's shown up for me when it's hard for himself so many times.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. Absolutely. It's our turn to be an advocate for them, for sure. Yeah. So tell me about having a guide dog along your journey. Tell me about that, about incorporating a guide dog before he was retired. Yeah.

Ness Murby: Yes. Before Lex was retired and became Zeb's best friend and the two of them are in cahoots over banana snacks. Yeah. Okay.

Theresa Stern: They do love bananas. I can't believe how much my dog loves bananas. Anyway, sorry.

Ness Murby: Yes. Yes. There's so many stories. Okay. So I'm going to start with a story of what I first try to convey to people about the independence a guide dog has afforded me. My first seeing-eye dog, Verde, we moved to Japan together, just him and I. And when I left my apartment for the first time, I said to him, "Find a train station."

Theresa Stern: Wow. Okay.

Ness Murby: Because the "find" command is something that was taught through Seeing Eye Dogs Australia. And I had my hydration pack on. And I said, "Find a train station." He walked for an hour and he found me a train station.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh. [inaudible 00:19:02]

Ness Murby: Oh, yeah. And so this is when I recognized that having a guide dog is a connection. It's intuitive. It's working together. It's teamwork and trust. And so progressing to my second guide dog was a whole new journey as well because I'm working with Guide Dogs for the Blind, and I'm working with a new dog, and it's an adjustment. And it's my learning and growth too.

And that was a privilege for me to grow with not just another dog, but with another organization that was helping me learn new things as well and adapt. Lexington, I like to tell the story of the 2016 Paralympics. And Lexington was one of two guide dogs in the village. And he became incredibly famous, so famous that several articles were written about him.

Theresa Stern: Really?

Ness Murby: In fact, it was this beautiful connection with people whereby we were changing the idea of what people understood was possible. Because going through a village, there are people from so many different geographic locations, so many different cultures in the same place.

And so then there's also so many values and systems of understanding. And just seeing how Lex worked with me was something that bridged language barriers, bridged cultural barriers. And that was a beautiful, beautiful thing.

The comedy though, to this aspect, is an article came out after the games and said, "The top 10 personalities to impact the 2016 Paralympic games." Lexington was number seven. Not me. Lexington.

Theresa Stern: No way.

Ness Murby: And I feel like that's why they said personalities, because Lexington was a personality of the games.

Theresa Stern: I love it. I love it.

Ness Murby: He always has been. And I think he always will be such an amazing personality and has left a beautiful legacy. So now in his retirement, I can't wait to see what he teaches my next dog.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Yes. Yes. I love that. I know. They always make the list, right? We just go along for the ride, it seems like, sometimes.

Ness Murby: Indeed. Yeah. Yeah. And I think something as well I would say about having a guide dog and independence is, obviously, I've mentioned travel. I think having a guide dog has not just afforded me independence but also has afforded me companionship.

And I've never really felt isolated with a guide dog by my side. I felt like there's a sense of security and safety and teamwork there. And we've been to so many different countries that... I think I need to get Frequent Flyer points for the dog.

Theresa Stern: I know, right? It's only fair. They take up our floor space, so right?

Ness Murby: Yes. I think what's amazing is their adaptability as well. Again, speaking to different cultures and different expectations, that's something that Lexington was so adaptable and so eager to learn and grow.

When we were matched, when he was 17 months at Guide Dogs for the Blind, I remember just this idea of what's possible, and he couldn't sit still. Something that was really interesting was he wanted to keep learning. And that's much like having a kid. What a beautiful lesson for all of us is to have that desire for learning and growth and to just keep adapting.

Theresa Stern: Yep. And always so optimistic. They're always sure that... You know what I mean? They're going to get what they... You know what I mean? They're just always optimistic, I think, which is just also a good lesson. Yeah. Yeah.

They don't keep grudges or all of that stuff. Very cool. So tell me about Paris. You're going to go to Paris. What's your sport going to be? Are you doing goalball again? That's a crazy sport, by the way. Oh my God.

Ness Murby: Yes. The contact sport for blinkies.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Ness Murby: Yeah. So I retired from goalball some time ago, and similarly from powerlifting. And an interesting note about athletics is that the only F11 throwing event that is available for my category is discus. That is a sole F11 event, which is a category for the least functional vision.

Theresa Stern: Okay. Okay.

Ness Murby: Yeah. It's interesting because I used to do javelin and shot put. Yeah. So I had a forced retirement from javelin. In terms of moving forward in sport, I think... Well, it's a tangent to your question. But part of coming out as trans was I recognize I was ranked top eight in the world. Top eight in the world-

Theresa Stern: It's huge.

Ness Murby: ... not as my authentic self.

Theresa Stern: Right.

Ness Murby: Yeah. Thank you. It's huge. And I think when I came out, I was told that there was no space for me in sport. And so what's interesting to my mind is being ranked top eight in the world and being told that there's no space for me in sport as I come out as trans. And also being told that maybe I just don't have what it takes to be elite. And that's really interesting because I already am elite.

And choosing to go through transition whilst ranked top in the world means that I'm choosing to publicly start over.

Theresa Stern: That's right.

Ness Murby: And that's something that I recognized was hard and also needed to be done. So, for me, training, competing, medically transitioning, and being world-ranked is what I'm doing. So the goal is to strive for Paris 2024.

And right now it's as much about fighting for space as it is about holding space, because I know that I am going to... It's as much about holding space because I know that the next person won't have to transition when they're already in elite sport. Maybe they'll actually be able to transition when they feel ready to and enter sport as their authentic self and have this space held for them.

So that's my hope. And I challenge each person to participate and help hold the space as an ally, as part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, to just hold space and fight for space. Because the next person needs to know that they're not alone and won't have to fight.

Theresa Stern: Yes. Yes. Well, thank you. Thank you for fighting. And good luck. We'll be thinking good Paris thoughts for you as you go on your journey.

Ness Murby: Thank you.

Theresa Stern: And keep us updated on how things are going. Ness, it's been just an absolute delight chatting with you today. Thank you so much for stopping by Central Bark.

Ness Murby: Thank you. It's been a pleasure. Great to be a part of Central Bark and a member of the Guide Dogs for the Blind Community.

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