Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Theresa, and I'm your host. Well, hello everyone and welcome to Central Bark. Today we have a very special show for you. We are welcoming back to Central Bark president and CEO of Guide Dogs for the Blind, Christine Benninger. Chris actually helped us launch this podcast a little over a year ago to celebrate our 80th anniversary. Chris, we're so excited to have you back.

Christine Benninger: Oh my God, Theresa, I'm so excited to be here. Hard to believe it's been a whole year.

Theresa: I know. I know. I know. And boy, it's been a milestone year for us, right, at Guide Dogs for the Blind, 80 years. Can you tell us a little bit, I know there's lots of celebrations and lots of stuff going on for our 80th, can you kind of give us a little recap of some of the highlights?

Christine I can. I can. Well, first I'll just going to say how proud I am to work for an organization that's been here for 80 years. We're now starting our 81st year, right?

Theresa: Right. Yes.

Christine Very, very few organizations, whether they're for-profits or nonprofits, have been around for that length of time. So I think this last year has been a celebration of our mission and how relevant our mission remains to our clients and our community. But lots was accomplished this last year. I have to be honest. Things were tough during the pandemic.

Theresa: Yes. They were.

Christine It was hard.

Theresa: Yep.

Christine And we have a business that you can't just stop.

Theresa: Right.

Christine Right.

Theresa: Right.

Christine So what was exciting about this past year, and it couldn't have been a better year, it was our 80th year, right?

Theresa: Yeah.

Christine Is that we started bringing things back to really much more of a normal cadence. Clients were coming back to campus, were being trained on our campuses, our classes were increasing.

Theresa: Yes.

Christine We were continuing to expand our services and laying the foundation for even more growth. So one of the tenants of our 10-year strategic plan is to expand our services, be able to meet our clients' needs based on where they are in their life.

Theresa: Oh, yes.

Christine And we saw a lot of that happening this last year. So I am so excited that we've had a fantastic year and it sets us up for an even better year now.

Theresa: Absolutely. Yeah.

Christine [inaudible 00:02:53] this year.

Theresa: Yeah. And I agree with you. It's so exciting that maybe during a time when we might have been tempted to sort of scale back, we've actually looked at more ways of serving people and how we can kind of expand those services and like you said, meet people where they're at. Can you tell us a little bit, give us maybe some examples of this in our new programming?

Christine Oh, I can, I can, I can, and the challenge is going to be to be able to do this in 20 minutes or less.

Theresa: I know.

Christine But I think let's first start with a project actually that you spearheaded Theresa, which was our research study that we did in combination with AFB.

Theresa: Oh yeah.

Christine Really about the trends that are happening within the blind and low vision community. And lot of really good information came from that study. And that study has helped reinforce the direction that we're taking, particularly in some of the areas that we're looking at for expansion of services. So this past year, we have been piloting extending our OMI program, orientation mobility immersion program to two weeks, including critical services like audiology, right?

Theresa: Yes.

Christine Physical therapy, counseling. All of those services start to focus on the whole person and not just a part of the person.

Theresa: Right.

Christine And what's exciting about that is that not only were our pilots successful, but we're now looking to not only expand those services into all of our OMI programs, but also into our guide dog programs as well.

Theresa: Wow.

Christine So I'm thrilled, I'm absolutely thrilled to see that. We saw an expansion of our Canine Buddy program. And,

Theresa: I love that program, Chris.

Christine I do too. I do too. And we expanded the program not only to serve children or youth, but also adults. And that's been so exciting to see because many of our clients that either are choosing not to get another guide dog either because they're not ready to get another guide dog, or they may not be traveling as much as they were before. But the companionship, the social bridge, all of the things that a guide dog does,

Theresa: Yes.

Christine Really makes a huge difference.

Theresa: Yep.

Christine We've expanded that program now across all of the US. We've included our veterinary financial assistance program.

Theresa: That's huge.

Christine It's huge.

Theresa: Yeah.

Christine It's absolutely huge.

Theresa: I think that veterinary program, I mean, it just really removes any barriers, right, for people to being able to really benefit from one of our amazing animals.

Christine Absolutely. And we also know that a dog, both a guide dog and also a well-trained canine buddy, make a huge difference in people's lives. And so the more that we can do to break down those barriers and if cost is a barrier, veterinary cost is a barrier. I'm excited that we've been able to take that barrier down to allow people to be able to get a canine buddy. Last year we saw a return of graduations, on campus graduations. That's been so wonderful.

Theresa: Yes.

Christine And really, as somebody on staff, it's been so wonderful to get back to seeing our graduations and seeing our whole mission come together.

Theresa: Absolutely.

Christine [inaudible 00:07:09] graduations.

Theresa: Yeah.

Christine We had our 80th year gala. Oh my God. And it was,

Theresa: Yes, we did.

Christine Oh, it was so fun.

Theresa: Yes.

Christine I have to say that I didn't realize how much I really had missed them and missing people until I got there. And it was like, oh my God.

Theresa: I know and everybody was in such a good mood. It was such a party. Yeah.

Christine It was. It was. And lots and lots and lots of hugs. That was great.

Theresa: Yes. Yes.

Christine It was a fantastic party, and it was a successful event. We're returning to puppy outings, and we've been having a number of very fun airport outings with our puppy raisers, outings to fun and different places. And I think that's been not only fantastic for our dogs to get that kind of exposure, but also too, for our puppy raisers to be able to get together again and get out and about and do all the fun things that they were doing pre-pandemic.

Theresa: Yes. Feels like yeah, things are getting a little more normal, but with just a lot of exciting and fun stuff to coming along with it. So it's makes sort of everything more of a celebration I think.

Christine It does. It does. And as I said, I mean, maybe it's fortuitous, maybe, I don't know, it's in the stars, but the fact that it all occurred on our 80th anniversary year.

Theresa: Yes.

Christine Right.

Theresa: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Christine Special.

Theresa: Yeah. Yeah. There are no accidents Chris.

Christine Yeah. And I got a puppy last year.

Theresa: I was going to ask you, because last year, you heard it here first, folks,

Christine Yes.

Theresa: On Central Bark even before I knew Chris, you were adopting a new little Basset hound. Tell us about your Basset hound.

Christine Oh my God. Oh my God. Well, he celebrated his first birthday on January 3rd, so,

Theresa: Aw.

Christine He's a little over a year. He has been such a blessing. But I will tell you that my wonderful, wonderful, wonderful career change, golden retriever, thank God for her. Thank God, because he's my 21st dog as an adult. And I was like, oh my God, I can do this. But I've never raised a puppy.

Theresa: Yes. That's a whole different ballgame.

Christine Oh my God. And thank God she was there, because after a couple weeks, she tapped me on the shoulder and said, mom, I got it. I got it. You back off. I got it. And she's done a wonderful job raising this little guy, and he's wonderful.

Theresa: Oh my gosh.

Christine So thank you.

Theresa: Oh gosh. Well, I mean, Boone has definitely been, I think, a blessing or a Boone to all of us at Guide Dogs, because when we just need a little basset hound love, we can come by your office and feel those big, old, long ears and,

Christine He loves it.

Theresa: His little short legs.

Christine He loves it.

Theresa: It's so cute.

Christine He can't get enough of that. Yeah.

Theresa: So what about next year? It's so crazy to think about it, but what's on tap? What could we be looking forward to? What are you excited about for next year? Any more Basset hounds or maybe a pony? I don't know.

Christine Yeah.

Theresa: But.

Christine Well, so no, no more Basset hounds, no puppies. Right. But for 2023, where are we now? 2023.

Theresa: Yeah.

Christine There's lots on the horizon for this year because we put the foundations in place for this expansion of our services, and that is happening. Our puppy center is going full steam ahead with the wellingbell of lots and lots and lots of puppies, which is really great.

Theresa: Yes.

Christine We're getting them out to puppy raisers. We're expanding our reach, not only with our guide dog services, but with our OMI services, our canine buddies, and we're serving people in, as I mentioned before, where they are as opposed to where we are. So I'm excited about all of that taking place in this next year. It's building upon this foundation that we put in place last year and really going forward in a very, very big way. And I think we've got some hot off the press exciting news,

Theresa: Yes.

Christine Theresa.

Theresa: Yes. Yes. Tell us. Tell us.

Christine Just hired our director of research, and I'm so excited with this new position because as we are really looking at what are the things that we can do to make our dogs more successful so that we're not having to constantly breed as many dogs. Right. The higher our success rate, the more clients we can serve with fewer dogs bred. We have just recently hired a director of canine research, and this will give us the capability to really delve into one of the biggest areas of career change for our dogs, which is along sort of that general line of behavior.

Theresa: Oh, yeah.

Christine So looking at what more we can do either through genetics or through environmental shaping to help ensure the success of more of our dogs from a behavior standpoint to make it all the way through as either a canine buddy or a guide.

Theresa: That's fantastic.

Christine So excited to be able to take this step going forward. And I'll throw one other thing in, and that's that we have some very exciting things on the horizon for our youth programs, and I want to give you credit for this, Theresa. It's really you and your team who've put this together. So maybe why don't you talk a little bit about this upcoming class with that?

Theresa: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. No, and I will give all the credit to my team, Jane Flower and Rabi Dao, and of course Jay Cook, who really are our outreach department, and put together a really cool program that we are doing this year in cooperation with the American Printing House, APH, and Career Connect. And we're going to have a camp that will introduce sort of college age folks with visual impairments to both the guide dog lifestyle and to resources around choosing a career, interviewing for jobs. They're going to come onto to our Oregon campus and do some informational interview with our employees. So I just think it's a really great way for us to maybe do a little bit to help with that just ongoing issue that a lot of folks with visual impairment are facing, which is unemployment. So we're pretty excited about that program, too.

Christine Oh, I'm very excited.

Theresa: Sounds so exciting. Sounds so exciting. So if you had a word or a phrase to kind of sum up what you see for next year at Guide Dogs for the Blind, what would that be?

Christine That's a really good question. And just based on the fact that we're going forward, full steam ahead.

Theresa: Yeah.

Christine I think a great word is forward.

Theresa: Forward.

Christine Because Yeah, the word that, well, you know that,

Theresa: Yeah.

Christine Theresa as a guide dog user. You use that word,

Theresa: All the time.

Christine All the time, right?

Theresa: Yeah. Yeah.

Christine To let Wills know, we're going forward.

Theresa: Going forward. I love it. I love it. Well, we're lucky to be going forward with you, Chris, at the helm. So thank you so much for everything you do for Guide Dogs for the Blind, and thanks so much for joining us today at Central Bark.

Christine Thank you, Theresa.

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