Theresa:

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 am excited about today's episode. Joining me is Dr. Lynna Feng. She is the research manager at Guide Dogs for the Blind. She's going to talk a little bit about her experiences and about the impact that her work is making on GDB programs, as well as on guide dog industry worldwide. So, welcome, welcome, Lynna. So glad to have you here.

Dr. Lynna Feng:

Thank you, Teresa. I'm really excited to be here.

Theresa:

You know what, Lynna? I don't know that we've had you on Central Bark in the past, so could you tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to guide dogs, and then a little bit about your role?

Lynna:

Sure. Many people who grow up loving dogs and loving animals, I thought that I was going to be a veterinarian when I grew up. I went through all of high school and I applied to colleges thinking that I was going to go to vet school. I started my undergraduate degree at UC Davis in animal sciences and realized that I didn't really find an interest in the medicine side, and I was really more interested in the behavior side. I discovered this whole area of study where people study animal behavior and even in dogs' behavior, cognition, the human-animal relationship and all of those things, and that really sucked me in. I went to grad school instead of vet school. I have a master's degree in applied statistics so that I could do all of the math things.

Theresa:

Just a side note to everybody, Lynna is our go-to GDB for anything statistics. It's like, "Ooh, Lynna put that together, I bet, because that's amazing." So, thank you for suffering through statistics for all of us.

Lynna:

Well, as it turns out, I love data and spreadsheets.

Theresa:

Awesome.

Lynna:

And so it was just a really good fit. I got my master's degree getting myself all ready to join academia to do research forever. Then when I did my PhD, I did my PhD in psychology, but really studying the human-animal relationship and how dog training fits into that. And as I was finishing my PhD, I went, "I don't really want to be an academic forever."

Along the way, I was doing some dog training, supporting some behavior consulting with my mentor, Dr. Sophia Yin, who was a world renowned veterinary behaviorist. I would really like to work something more applied. So as I was finishing writing my thesis, I had moved back home and gone, "Maybe I should find a job." In order to get my foot in the door in the working dog world, in the service and guide dog industry, I applied for a job as a canine welfare training technician here at GDB.

My journey at GDB started as a CWTT, on campus, in the kennels, working with the dogs, getting to know the organization, the programs, how everything worked and how everything interacted together.

Theresa:

Yes.

Lynna:

It was super fun for me. Not very long after, after I had finished submitting my thesis and getting all of that wrapped up, I moved into the puppy raising program here at GDB. For about five years, I did curriculum development for puppy raising-

Theresa:

Perfect fit.

Lynna:

... and big data stuff, so looking at historical patterns, trends, those kinds of things. More recently, just a couple of months ago, I have moved officially into our research team. My role is now canine research manager, and I get to spend even more of my time doing the data things, doing the educational piece a little bit more broadly for the organization rather than just in puppy raising.

Theresa:

Wow. That's quite a journey. It really is. That's pretty amazing.

Lynna:

I'm very happy with where I am now.

Theresa:

Yeah. Could get worse.

Lynna:

[inaudible 00:04:20] over here.

Theresa:

We're just so lucky to have you, have you have... Because it takes a while to really understand sort of the whole Guide Dogs for the Blind. It's a lot of moving pieces. Having you start where you did I think really helps us in so many ways because you really get how it all sort of fits together.

Lynna:

Absolutely. I think that's one of the challenges of coming from academia and moving into an applied role in an organization that is so complex with so many moving pieces is that you come in and you aren't really an expert. You might be an expert in the area of study where you come from and how it interfaces with real life, with an organization, with all of the history and the moving pieces of an organization. It really is so much about learning for a really long time.

Theresa:

Long time.

Lynna:

A really, really long time.

Theresa:

Totally. So tell us a little bit about this new research program. Can you give us an overview of what you guys are...what you're sort of hoping for and how that's going to add to the mission of Guide Dogs for the Blind?

Lynna:

I will start by saying that our formal research program, so the Gard-Furlong Canine Research Program, is relatively new and it's made possible by the incredible support of Elizabeth Gard and Thomas Furlong. And research at GDB is not really new. So for a really long time, we have been committed to participating in research that advances health behavior and the longevity of our dogs, as well as their partnerships with our clients who are blind or visually impaired. This is just the opportunity for us to have staff, including myself, who are truly dedicated to this as our primary role at the organization.

So, it really is an opportunity for us to truly lean in and ask the questions that outside researchers might not be asking, things that are really internally driven where we are like, "How does this protocol impact our dog's progress through the program? Can we run a pilot that tests this against what we're currently doing?" Things that we really want to know and we would like to move forward with in understanding and collecting data and making some decisions with that data that outside researchers may not know to ask those questions.

Theresa:

Right.

Lynna:

As a participant in research, we didn't really have the opportunity to, I guess, sort of mold those questions ourselves, and we didn't have the bandwidth as staff who were working in the other departments to also lead these large scale research projects.

Theresa:

That's great. So you can really focus.

Lynna:

Yes, absolutely. I would say that what we're doing is not very different in terms of our goals and our mission and what we want research to offer to GDB as a whole. It is really helping to inform data-driven decision-making, improvements to our program, learning, growing, all of those things. And at the same time, we're able to do that more quickly and with more thought as our program has really turned into what it is and moving forward and continuing to grow.

Theresa:

Well, it's super exciting. I think for us having this for our school for Guide Dogs for the Blind is great. It's going to be able to impact so many lives that way. But also, GDB is a real believer in sharing knowledge and to bring everybody sort of up to speed or whatever. I do love that about what we do at Guide Dogs for the Blind as well.

Lynna:

It is incredible. It's such a special opportunity to be able to do that.

Theresa:

I know one of the areas that is sort of most... It's sort of a highlight right now, and that's about dog socialization. Can you tell us what that means and why that's important to our colony of dogs?

Lynna:

Most people have probably heard about socialization in one of two ways. Either they got a cute little puppy and they were told, "It's really important to socialize your puppy," or they maybe adopted an older dog, maybe from a shelter, maybe a dog who came from somewhere that wasn't a lot like the life that they're going into, and they were counseled that, "Maybe this dog grew up with poor socialization, and so you might need to make some adjustments to their lifestyle," or, "They may not be as resilient to the changes that are about to happen as they come live in the city with you when they grow up on a farm." When we think about socialization, it's really preparing our dogs to exist in our world. The human world is a weird and wonderful place.

Theresa:

It is.

Lynna:

It's all sorts of crazy things.

Theresa:

It's hard for humans to adjust too, right?

Lynna:

Absolutely. Socialization, especially when we have the opportunity to start with puppies, is really about nurturing and molding them as individuals to learn that all of the kind of weird things that might happen or might show up in their lives are totally normal, that getting unexpectedly startled by something is just a part of everyday life. It's not something to worry about. New is normal, basically, is what we are trying to aim for when we're talking about socialization.

There is also the social piece of socialization, and that is what a lot of people hang on to because that's their understanding of socialization, is that you take your brand new puppy and you socialize them with other dogs, other people, different animals. Where that is coming from is it's really important for dogs to learn how to interact with the people around them, other animals, and especially for our dogs who are growing up to be guide dogs and working dogs who every dog that they meet on the street is not going to be their new best friend.

Theresa:

Right.

Lynna:

We especially want to set those expectations that when you're out and about in everyday life, things might be happening. What we're teaching our dogs is to notice new things and disregard them. Just acknowledge that things are happening in the world and move on and remain engaged with their person-

Theresa:

Person.

Lynna:

... because that is...

Theresa:

Now that totally makes sense.

Lynna:

Right. It's like, "Hey, all this stuff is going on. It's very interesting. We know that you're interested. But look at me. Let's keep going." No, that totally makes sense.

Theresa:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Lynna:

I love that. Well, and then I think that also gives them that comfort that it's all good. Because they look at you and you're not freaked out by it, hopefully. Hopefully nothing-

Theresa:

Exactly.

Lynna:

... crazy is going on, right? Then they start to look to you for how you act, I guess.

Theresa:

Yeah.

Lynna:

So, how we introduce them to novelty is going to have a big impact on how they are able to perceive and engage with new things that are around them. We can also set them up by not starting with something hugely spooky.

Theresa:

Right, right.

Lynna:

When we start with really young puppies, we introduce them to pretty neutral, boring, novel things, so like crinkly stuff under their feet or flooring that is just a little bit weird or might sound a little bit different than just the regular floor that they're used to.

As they grow up, then we start exposing them to more and more challenging environments because they have this really broad, essentially bank account of experiences where they've experienced little bits of novelty or really mild stressors that ended up being no big deal, and they were able to learn to disregard them. So now when something a little bit more challenging crops up in their life, they can dig into that bank account. They can dig into those past experiences that help them realize, "This is just another one of those things. It's totally okay. Look, we're going to go play and have fun and eat cookies over here now." That's always a good way to reset your mind, eating cookies. I would agree with that.

Theresa:

I wish somebody would feed me cookies.

Lynna:

I know. I know.

Theresa:

So yeah, so it sounds like it's really important not just socialization, but actually how you socialize a dog and kind of... If you could give us a little bit of information about that. I mean, you kind of did same kind of starting at one with small things and then bigger, but maybe a little bit of information and maybe how to recognize when, ooh, maybe you've pushed the envelope a little too far and what to do then.

Lynna:

Oh, it is such a good question. This is where socialization is really sort of an art form more than just a science. It is really about looking at the individual in front of you and being able to read body language. Puppies communicate with us all the time using their body language.

So unlike people, they're not super verbal. Most of the communication that they do with us is through body language, whether they're happy and wiggly and calm and relaxed, or if they're feeling a little bit concerned about something, maybe they're looking at it more often, maybe their ears are a little bit back and lowered, or they were hungry before and suddenly they're not so interested in the kibble that you're offering them.

All of those little signs that they might be worried about something in their environment are really key for us to be able to recognize as we're introducing puppies to new things, because we want our puppies to experience novelty in a way that is a positive thing for them. We want them to learn that these new things are good and really kind of boring rather than something to worry about. So if the puppy is worried about... Let's say you went to a bus stop. You were going to hang out and let the puppy watch the bus go by, and the puppy is seeming a little bit worried, maybe acting a little bit tired, even though they shouldn't be tired, anything like that where they are deviating from their normal self is likely an indication that something is not quite right and you might need to make your socialization experience a little bit easier.

There are different ways to do that. You can add some more distance away from the bus stop. You might be able to just move yourself 10 or 20 feet back, assuming it's safe to do so. From there, you can sit a little bit further away from whatever might be spooking the puppy. And if they then return to their normal, happy, peppy self and they're happy to take kibble from you again, then you're good. You found a good spot to hang out and socialize them to that bus going by at a level where they might be noticing it, but they're not worried about it.

The other thing you could do is keep your sessions really short. The longer length of time you might be exposing a dog to something, then they have that time to build up those stress hormones. So even if it was quite low level, that build up over time can make something become more and more overwhelming for them. So if we are exposing them to something maybe mildly stressful, we want to make sure that we keep it short and we keep it as happy and positive as possible and use that distance.

Theresa:

Right. I think that's just such good advice for folks because I think a lot of times we want to rush into things and have this all figured out. "We got to get this puppy socialized." But little steps can really pay off more so in the long run, it sounds like.

Lynna:

Yes, absolutely. Socialization is really less about ripping off the bandaid and getting through it, and more about taking things slowly, taking things at whatever pace the puppy is telling you is appropriate for them. Some puppies are really brave and-

Theresa:

Yeah, right, where they'll try anything.

Lynna:

... really go-getters. They're like, "Absolutely. Let's do all of the things." And you're like, "Okay. Then we are going to expose you to all the things, and we're going to work on being calm around all of the things."

Theresa:

Well, and I think that's a really good point as well, is maybe a dog you had five years ago, you're like, "Well, this dog could do it. This other dog does..." Every dog is sort of different, has different sensitivity levels, just like all of us.

Lynna:

Absolutely. And a different timeline.

Theresa:

Well, and I think that's what patience really pays off. It reminds me, and I keep thinking about when they used to say, "Oh, just throw your kid in the deep end and they'll learn to swim," and then that child never wants to be around water anymore. That's sort of-

Lynna:

Exactly.

Theresa:

That's sort of similar.

Lynna:

It is exactly. So sort of put yourself in that dog's mind for a minute and say, "Well, how would I want to be?"

Theresa:

Very cool. Well, I think this is really going to help our Central Bark listeners who might have dogs at home. The work that the puppy raisers put in in that first year is crucial, wouldn't you say, too?

Lynna:

Yes, absolutely. Our puppy raisers do such a good job of all of the things that we've been talking about today. They really are right there with the puppies, getting to know them as individuals, setting them up for success, exposing them to different things at just the right levels so that... Maybe this puppy was ready to go to school with you when they were five months old, but this next puppy is not because this next puppy finds something about school a little bit spooky. Maybe it's the slippery floors at school or those stairs that you have to go up and down. Our puppy raisers are fantastic at assessing situations, getting a sense of what is right for the individual dog that they're raising at that time, and their leaders are also so invaluable for them as they're exploring those things.

Theresa:

I want to ask you... This is a broadcast where we're just using audio, but I have the luxury of having some video, too, and I hear there is a cute little pumpkin named Barley in your shot right now. Can you tell us a little bit about Barley?

Lynna:

Barley is my pet dog. He is not a GDB Career Change dog. I call him a small white fluffy, which is basically exactly what he is. He's about 10 pounds, and he's this curly little floofy thing. He's just the best dog.

Theresa:

How long have you had him?

Lynna:

I got him about three years ago. So Central Bark listeners who have-

Theresa:

Yes.

Lynna:

... been involved with puppy raising in the past decade or more would recognize the name Pat Cook.

Theresa:

Oh, yeah.

Lynna:

Pat Cook is the one who found Barley for me before she retired from GDB. She found Barley for me because I was looking for a little dog to do sports with. He is my teeny weeny sport dog. We do agility and nose work.

Theresa:

Oh, you do?

Lynna:

Yeah.

Theresa:

Oh my gosh. [inaudible 00:20:01].

Lynna:

And he is almost always the smallest dog there, but we have a lot of fun.

Theresa:

Well, that's awesome. Well, thank you for introducing him to all of us. I wish he was right here so I could just cuddle that little wife snowball. Oh, my gosh. Well, Lynna, thank you so much for joining us today, and thank you for all the amazing stellar work you do for Guide Dogs for the Blind. All of us who are lucky enough to have a guide dog from our program tip our hats to you in helping us have really well-adjusted, happy dogs to live and work with. So, thank you so much.

Lynna:

Well, thank you, Teresa. I feel so incredibly privileged to have the opportunity to be here and to work with everybody who's here at GDB because everybody is so mission-driven, and we all here for the people and for the puppies. It's just wonderful to be part of GDB.

Theresa:

Well, thank you so much.

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