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 Central Bark. I am so excited today about our guest. She is the Director of Puppy Raising at Guide Dogs for the Blind, Sarah Blevins. And Sarah's going to tell us a little bit about the essential role that puppy raisers play in really fulfilling the mission of Guide Dogs for the Blind, and some new innovations that make it possible for more people to participate. Because who doesn't want to raise a puppy, right, Sarah?

Sarah Blevins: Exactly.

Theresa Stern: So Sarah, why don't you tell everybody, I mean, I've known you forever. In fact, we started at Guide Dogs the very same year, class of '99.

Sarah Blevins: That is correct.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, so tell us a little bit about your journey at Guide Dogs for the Blind, a little bit about yourself.

Sarah Blevins: Thanks, Theresa. I am so excited to be here and talk about my favorite subject in the world, puppy raising. So I am the Director of Puppy Raising, as you said. I have been with GDB for almost 26 years. And I was actually a campus volunteer before that, so been around for a really long time.

Theresa Stern: Wow. I didn't know that.

Sarah Blevins: I was, yeah.

Theresa Stern: Oh, cool.

Sarah Blevins: In fact, one of the first things I did was volunteer at one of our Puppy Raising Fun Days, which is our annual event that recognizes our puppy raising volunteers. So, I left that day completely inspired and covered in snow cone syrup onto my arms, but it was absolutely amazing.

Theresa Stern: Awesome.

Sarah Blevins: And so I have actually had the privilege of being on the puppy raising team for my entire career here at Guide Dogs for the Blind. And I really was inspired when I was young by my mother who actually went to library book sales and bought books about dogs and people doing amazing things. And then ended up buying a book about a young girl who was about my age at the time, called Light A Single Candle, and about her losing her vision and getting a guide dog. And that was really the thing that helped me find my purpose and know I wanted to be here. And I'm just always every day grateful that she bought that book.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Isn't it funny how just like one little spark to light a fire, it's amazing.

Sarah Blevins: Exactly.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. So you've raised a puppy haven't you?

Sarah Blevins: I did, I did.

Theresa Stern: Or a couple?

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, my roommate at the time who also worked at Guide Dogs for the Blind, we raised a puppy. His name was Knox and he was absolutely adorable and we had a lot of fun doing it. That was a really long time ago, but yes, but my appreciation for puppy raisers only grew from raising a puppy myself, absolutely.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. No, totally. I think you kind of have to do it yourself to have that feel for it and to be in the position that you're in now. It totally, I think was probably very foundational for all the decisions you have to make now. Yeah.

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, and raising any puppy is an adventure, right? A challenge, an adventure, and they're just so great. So cute and fluffy and sweet.

Theresa Stern: But naughty, and naughty sometimes.

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, they're a little bit naughty sometimes. It's true, but that's what makes it so sweet when they learn and grow.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, absolutely. So I know that some new things have been happening, and one of them was in 2024, you guys kind of pulled back the curtain on the whole Puppy Raising situation, how it works and all kind of put everything into sort of a guidebook. Can you tell me a little bit about that and what the reaction has been to that?

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, absolutely. I'm always excited to talk about this because it was really an incredible adventure that we had last year. So, we had been talking for a long time about the Puppy Raising Program and just always looking to continuously improve and really look at what puppy raising volunteers need, what the puppies need.

 And so when we started this undertaking, really, we started with the latest research that we could find about how puppies develop confidence because being confident is one of the most important things for a guide dog to be able to be out in the world and to experience all the things that they experience in their daily lives with their partner. And so we want to be able to build that confidence from day one with our puppies. And so we looked at the research and kind of the science of how we're learning in the world. There's some really great research out there about how puppies do that and also how they build these strong trusting bonds with people. And in doing so, we really unlocked just some incredible new ways to have our Puppy Raising volunteers learn how to interact with their puppies and how to build that confidence.

 And what we realized is how much fun it is to build confidence, because you can do that by playing games and what's called enrichment activities, where you enrich the puppy's lives through these different fun games that you play with them, social engagement with the puppy, really learning all the good things that come from humans. And it also, what we learned too was about how to kind of personalize the experience for each puppy. Every puppy is really different, and so kind of how to apply all those things we learned and how to teach our puppy raising volunteers, not necessarily all the details of exactly the way something happens, but more like how the puppy's feeling about what's happening, learning how to read that puppy's body language and kind of see, how fast should I go through this experience or should I take a little bit of time? And again, how to make it fun and how to just really build that partnership with that puppy from a very young age. So, that's why we're so excited.

 And then we took the information and we put it out in a new way in our Puppy Raising guidebook in a way that's just really easy to learn. And then developed a way for people to learn the information through some new workshops and experiences that they get to have as they're learning how to raise a puppy.

Theresa Stern: That is so cool, and I think it just makes so much sense, having been a guide dog user through four different guide dogs, they're all different. And like you said, that confidence that is really the number one important attribute for these dogs to have because like you said, they go through so many different situations. The world is a crazy place, it stresses us all out. So having that, I think that foundation of really being able to trust the people they're with, to feel confident, it just makes so much sense. It's almost like raising children, I guess, right? So you stress them out about like, well, you're not doing that exactly right. Then they're stressed out, right? So.

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, and I think it's also learning how to learn. So when a puppy kind of learns how much fun it is to learn things and that the person, has these great rewards for learning things, all this positive reinforcement, which is the foundation of our program. Then they learn when they arrive on one of our Guide Dogs for the Blind campuses to learn guide work from our guide dog mobility instructors, they're really set up for success because they know that learning is fun, how to learn, and to look for that person for those great rewards as they're learning. And so, having that confidence and that resilience and all those things is what we're really looking for in that puppy.

 And I think too, you know Theresa, you also want that puppy to be a good roommate for you, right? A good housemate.

Theresa Stern: 100%.

Sarah Blevins: So there's also a kind of really, I importance put on that too. Really having good kind of manners, as you might call them, learning how to sort be a good citizen in the world and what that looks like. And those two things, loving to learn and that confidence, and then just learning how to have kind of good manners and be a good roommate, a good housemate for people, those are really the two important foundations of raising a guide dog puppy. And those are the things we really focused on when we were looking at updating our puppy raising curriculum.

Theresa Stern: Retooling, yeah. Yeah, and I think it's just sort of hitting me right now, listening to you. It's what we want as people too, to be a good citizen, a good roommate, and love to learn. So, it totally makes sense that this would be a great way to go.

 What did, speaking of the people side of things, we've had puppy raisers that have been raising puppies for many, many years, probably longer than you and I have been alive, some of them. So, how did they sort of respond to this sort of new approach?

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, we started with our puppy raising club leaders. They are the people in our program who are in our puppy clubs who help to daily guide the puppy raising volunteers who are in our program that are in puppy clubs. And we started with them. We actually brought them all to our California campus, some of them for the very first time.

Theresa Stern: Wow, okay.

Sarah Blevins: And we had a whole day where we talked about the program. We really talked about this research, like I mentioned, and all these things, and really wanted to have them with a really great understanding of the reasons and all of the ways in which we updated the program. I think doing that, first of all was so much fun, it was so great to be in a room with 100 plus leaders every day and be able to see them all, which was just incredible. And then-

Theresa Stern: That had to be amazing for you, just having-

Sarah Blevins: It was.

Theresa Stern: ... worked with them for so long and many of them not have been able to meet them in person, so yeah.

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, it really was. We had a lot of fun, and I think that that was a really important step for us in introducing the curriculum. And then we wanted to give time to the Puppy Raising volunteers that were already in our program who have learned all the things we asked them to learn before, and really give them an opportunity to look at the program, to ask questions. So we hosted town halls. We gave people six months at least to look at the program to learn about it. And then we had a transitional time in which they could explore the program, try new things. Really, that's how people learn best, right? Of having that experience.

Theresa Stern: Right, right. It's about how the people learn and how the dogs learn, right?

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, exactly, exactly.

Theresa Stern: Totally, yeah.

Sarah Blevins: And then in May of 2024, we transitioned to the updated curriculum. And there are still puppies in the program at that time who maybe had been started under one curriculum and under another, so it's a transition and everything in our program is like that. So we've just had a lot of opportunities along the way to host workshops, to answer questions, to have people just try things and see how they work for them. And our puppy raising volunteers have been incredible. They've tried things. There are things in program that we've never done before, right? And they've really leaned in and learned about the program and tried things and even things they might've been a little hesitant about at first. We've gotten a lot of feedback from them saying, "You know what? I wasn't sure about that, but I tried it with my brand new puppy that I got, and that was really great."

 And we fine-tuned along the way too. We've used that feedback in order to kind of keep looking at the program. We never want to just kind of be stagnant. We always want to be looking at how this really works in people's daily lives. And our Puppy Raising volunteers range in age from 9 to 90, and so we want to make sure that it works for people in every circumstance. Families, people who may live alone, people who go to work, people who go to school, just all of those different things. We want to make sure that it works for everyone, so.

Theresa Stern: Right. So, that's a great transition right there. I know that there's been some innovations not only in the curriculum as far as how we're interacting with the puppies and teaching the puppies, but also sort of in the logistics of puppy raising. Do you want to tell us a little bit about some of the new programs?

Sarah Blevins: Yeah. So we have our, what we kind of refer to now as our traditional Puppy Raising Program, which is where we have puppy raising volunteers in nine states, and they are in clubs, and those are regional clubs, and they go to club activities. They have this wonderful, incredible community of support. And we also realize that not everyone's life may fit into being able to go to these club activities. We have really busy families with lots of things going on in their lives, or just people who may want a different option.

 So we also introduced hybrid puppy raising, and our hybrid groups are based close to one of our two campuses at the moment. So there's one in the larger San Francisco Bay Area, and then there's one near our Portland, Oregon campus. And our hybrid puppy raisers are actually supported by our staff in the Puppy Raising Program. And they learn, they come to a workshop, which actually lots of puppy raisers do. We call it the Pathway to Puppy Workshop. And it's a day-long workshop in which they learn kind of the basics of the program. One of the things we really learned in this curriculum is how to teach people as they need to learn things, versus trying to expect everyone to learn absolutely everything all at once before they get a puppy. Right?

Theresa Stern: [inaudible 00:14:38] your head, yeah.

Sarah Blevins: Exactly. So what do I need to know right now to be with this puppy at this first age, right?

Theresa Stern: Right, so smart, yeah.

Sarah Blevins: And then you learn the next thing as you go, and as your puppy gets older, you learn the next thing too. And of course, every puppy teaches you something new as well. So we have these hybrid puppy raisers who come to this workshop, and then they're supported remotely by our staff. And then they keep coming to these workshops as the puppy goes through their raising experience and as they get older, so they come to one as the puppy is kind of in the middle of being puppy raised, and then as they're starting to prepare for recall, which is when they come back to one of our campuses for training with our instructors. So, they essentially have this kind of online and in-person hybrid model for puppy raising and it really works for a lot of people. They appreciate that kind of hands-on with the staff, and then they also appreciate the flexibility that it offers to them.

Theresa Stern: Right, very cool. Almost makes me want to raise a puppy.

Sarah Blevins: We would love to have you, of course.

 I'm also really excited about this brand new program that we're just about to introduce, which is called Puppy Pals, and it's called that because it is an opportunity for people who are located near our California campus, where our puppies are born in our state-of-the-art puppy center and cared for by our amazing and expert team of canine neonatal welfare specialists. Sometimes when these puppies are eight weeks of age and they're not quite ready for their delivery to their puppy raiser, maybe their raiser has something that they're waiting a few days before they're able to pick up their puppy, or the puppy is waiting to go on one of our puppy trucks, we want to take full advantage of the opportunity for that time. That is a really wonderful and magical time for puppies where they're learning so much.

 And so what we realized was that we could provide valuable socialization for these puppies. And having two puppies, Puppy Pals, together who are similar age, maybe almost always litter mates, which is brothers and sisters, and being able to put them into a home environment where they're seeing all of the sights, they're hearing all those sounds and the smells and all the things that go along with being in a home. And even better, they get to do that together. So they get to help gain confidence and have this really easy and comfortable transition to a home, and then to their puppy raiser home. So, we are providing all of the equipment and supplies that someone might need to have these two puppies in their home and be able to socialize them and support them for this kind of brief period of time between their waiting to go to their puppy raiser home.

Theresa Stern: That sounds amazing and is very tempting. I'm going to go call my husband right now and say, "Can we be on this?"

Sarah Blevins: Yes. We'll give you a [inaudible 00:17:57].

Theresa Stern: Two puppies.

Sarah Blevins: Which is a little fun little place for the, it's like the puppy's fun little kind of playpen, as it were, for them to be together to kind of see all those sights and sounds in a place that's very comforting and secure for them. And like they say, why would you have just one, right? Take two, they're small.

Theresa Stern: Take two. Well, that way they entertain each other. Actually, it's probably better, they probably entertain each other.

Sarah Blevins: They do, exactly, yeah, exactly. So, these puppy raising or these volunteers can sign up for this program and they're going to come to one of those Pathway to Puppy Workshops that we talked about so they can kind of learn how puppies learn at that age. They can have this customized training just for them, and then they can start to take these two puppies into their home whenever their schedule allows. So it's really flexible. They'll get an email saying, "These are the puppies that we have available for this date to this date." And they can sign up if they're ready to have a puppy in their home again. Or two, actually, two puppies.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness, I'm loving this.

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, I think it'll be so much fun. I'm really excited about it. I think people will love it, and I know the puppies will love it. And the puppy raisers too, because they're going to be receiving puppies that have had this valuable socialization-

Theresa Stern: [inaudible 00:19:14].

Sarah Blevins: ... time in someone's home, which is great.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, it's amazing.

Sarah Blevins: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Speaking of that, and I think puppy raising, just seriously having known many puppy raisers throughout my time at Guide Dogs, one thing that I hear about puppy raisers say all the time is that they did this as sort of a volunteer opportunity to help the community, and they really got back so much from it as well. So it's just to me, the perfect little magic where you're giving but you're receiving at the same time, and then it's also furthering and really bettering the community all at once. It's just really amazing.

 So, if people are interested and inspired after hearing more about puppy raising, how could they get more information?

Sarah Blevins: Yeah, we have a great dedicated page on the Guide Dogs for the Blind website, which is guidedogs.com/puppy, and you can learn all about puppy raising. We have a great video that talks about it, and then there's essentially an interest form that people can fill out, and we will reach out to you and connect you to either one of our hybrid clubs or to a traditional puppy club that we have, wherever you may be in the nine states where we raise puppies.

Theresa Stern: That's amazing. Well, I hope that people are inspired, Sarah, because we definitely could use more puppy raisers, right?

Sarah Blevins: Absolutely, we are always looking for puppy raising volunteers everywhere that we raise puppies. We absolutely love having new people. We provide resources, we provide the veterinary care for the puppies. We can provide additional support as people need it. We have what we call a fundamental support program that we have that can even provide dog food for people if they're in circumstances where they need that. So, we love to have new puppy raising volunteers. And they don't need any experience, they don't have to have raised other puppies even-

Theresa Stern: That's good.

Sarah Blevins: ... or how to let the dogs in their life. They can learn how to raise a guide dog puppy, and we have that community of support that can teach them whatever they need to know.

Theresa Stern: Right, and then I think there's some other volunteer opportunities in puppy raising as well, like club volunteers? And if you're not quite ready to raise your own puppy.

Sarah Blevins: Yes, absolutely. So our puppy clubs are, like I said, these incredible communities of support, and they need support too. So, we have opportunities for people to volunteer in clubs, and they can do all kinds of things in that club. Some people who volunteer in clubs, they help to line up socialization activities for the club when they're going to go out together and the puppies are going to learn.

Theresa Stern: Like the puppy party planner.

Sarah Blevins: ... to be in public. Exactly, the puppy party planner. They can help write newsletters, they can arrange puppy sitting. And speaking of that, we also have puppy sitting volunteers. People who watch puppies when their regular puppy raiser is maybe on vacation or needs to go on a trip, and so they can watch those puppies for them temporarily while they're away. So, it's also a great way to get started. Some people try puppy sitting for a while and get to have those experiences, see what it's like to have a puppy in their home, before they jump in and make the commitment.

Theresa Stern: Great, great. So Sarah, this has been so amazing. I'm so excited about the direction of puppy raising and what it really means for guide dog handlers years to come. So, thank you so much for being such an amazing and accomplished leader for the department and for spending so much of your career with Guide Dogs for the Blind. You make a big difference in people's lives, so thank you so much.

Sarah Blevins: Thank you so much, Theresa.

Theresa Stern: And thanks so much for joining us today on Central Bark.

Sarah Blevins: Absolutely my pleasure. Thank you.

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