



# Blind Frontiers Podcast Episode 1 Transcript

## Welcome to CCRC (Part 1)

September 17, 2023

### Male Speaker

When you first walk to the doors at 4800 North Lamar in Austin, Texas, it might just feel like any other adult training school or maybe a Community College in your area. Students are moving rapidly through the hallways to make sure they're in class on time. Staff members are talking and there's a general sense of industry and intensity in the air.

But then you start to notice some differences. You can hear the sounds of white canes tapping on linoleum. People are giving very clear verbal directions.

And you realize that you're in an adult blindness training center, but not just any adult training center. This is the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center for the blind.

### Female Speaker: 0:43

Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center is a one-of-a-kind training facility which provides career-oriented education for blind Texans who are reentering the workforce.

At CCRC, we meet people at every stage in their journey. With classes in cane travel, daily living skills, therapeutic recreation, state-of-the-art technology and customized career guidance, we open the door to blind frontiers.

### Jessica Glasebrook: 1:13

Welcome to Blind Frontiers, a production of the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center in Austin, Texas. Each week we bring you information about the blind experience. We'll meet with successful blind individuals, explore training opportunities and share interesting experiences. And now here's the host of Blind Frontiers—Jeff Molzow.

### Jeff Molzow: 1:38

Well, thank you very much, Jessica, and welcome everybody to Blind Frontiers. I am indeed your host, Jeff Molzow, and I'm so excited to share these shows about the blindness experience with you. This week, we're going to be talking about blindness training and specifically how to reobtain those skills that we need to go back to work, to regain our independence, to travel safely. This is why there are blindness training centers like CCRC. From our 90,000 square foot campus, located in north Austin, we serve blind Texans from all over the state of Texas. We have 11 different departments plus administrative staff, and you're going to



have the chance to meet several of those departments today. All of our staff are very passionate about what we do. We believe in our students and their potential and this starts right at the top with Center Director Julie Johnson.

## Julie Johnson: 2:29

My name is Julie Johnson and I'm the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center Director. My job is to ensure that the center is running smoothly to provide training for students from across the state of Texas who come to our program to receive training to learn independent living skills, to become job ready and be able to get out and accomplish their career goals. You know, we live in a visual world. Everything is visual. So, when someone starts losing the capacity to be able to get information from their environment and do those normal things that they used to do, it requires training. Our job is really to work with students who are losing vision or who have lost vision because some of our folks have been dealing with it for a while, and then some of our folks are newly losing vision. We want to help them realize their potential. In other words, we want to help build their confidence. We want to help them become confident in the skills that they're learning, so we want students to be independent so that when they get back out into the world, they can live a life that they want to live. You know, have the have goals that they want to accomplish and be able to do those independently. Have the skills to be able to work, to go to school. Have those opportunities that everybody else has.

## Jeff Molzow: 4:14

Much of that independence literally starts at home. Maslow's hierarchy of needs says we want to feel safe. We want to feel clean. Want to feel sheltered. We want to be able to cook for ourselves. And when we lose our vision, it does not mean we can't do those skills, it simply means we must use alternative techniques to accomplish them. Our adaptive Skills Department trains students in three basic areas—braille, organization and kitchen management. Here's supervisor Cindy Wofford to tell you more.

## Cindy Wolford: 4:44

When a student first comes to adaptive skills, we usually start with organization. It's business organization. So, we want to make sure that students are able to do things like banking. Can they access their bank account? Preferably through an app. We want to make sure that you can check your balance, pay your bills, transfer money to a savings account, maybe pay off a credit card. We want to make sure that they can transfer money, use a debit card, a credit card. Can they purchase items at a store?

We want to make sure that they can store and retrieve information like paperwork, things like tax statements or receipts or Social Security paperwork or medical paperwork. Mostly the question is if you need to put your hands on some kind of paperwork at home, can you do it and how would you do that? We also teach kitchen management. We're not a culinary school. We're going to teach you the basics of how to feed yourself independently. The other thing we teach is braille. Braille is usually going to be about a month. It's going to be uncontracted braille. We're



going to teach you to label your objects, your paperwork, your spices, your canned goods. Your freezer goods. Your things in your refrigerator. All of those can be labeled. We also have contracted braille. Not all the students are going to be appropriate for that, but if you are appropriate, then you're probably going to spend an extra month on contracted braille. So, you know, we don't want to be gatekeepers. We don't want to hold students up here. We want them to move through so that they're available for other departments to train them.

### Jeff Molzow: 6:26

Now that we're organized and well fed, we probably don't want to stay at home all the time we want to travel and our O&M department teaches our students to travel in multiple different travel modes, including walking, transit, paratransit, bus travel, and others. When a student arrives at CCRC, they are given and encouraged to use a long white straight cane. They are taught techniques such as open palm and pencil grip. And how to make sure the cane covers the entire area around them as they're walking. Once they've mastered these techniques inside the building, the student travels outside with their own instructor. They start with small quiet intersections and build up to more complex intersections and larger travel itineraries. Transit and paratransit are then added to allow the student to travel completely independently. Here's O&M supervisor Scott Meyer to tell you more.

### Scott Meyer: 7:19

We teach—Oh, anywhere to forty/fifty students on average per week on how to travel anywhere, any place, anytime. So, our goal is that they can walk or bus or take rides—whatever they need to do to get from A to B so that they can live to their fullest potential. In particular, meeting all their job travel needs. But it's also more than just a job. You know, people have their lives outside of work that they want to be able to travel as well. So, anything and everything we want to do what we can to make that happen.

### Jeff Molzow: 7:59

One of the more popular departments by far at CCRC is our technology department. Technology has taken over so many parts of our lives. Whether it be in recreation, travel and of course, there are very few jobs that don't require some interaction with technology. Here's Jesse Johnson to tell you more.

### Jesse Johnson: 8:17

Our main curriculum focuses on the use of the most common apps found in the workplace and school as well. We start off touch typing is essential for everybody I believe, not even [just] blind people, but if you're blind, you certainly need to do that. So, we use a program called TypeAbility to guide them through the process of learning to touch type and learning their extended keyboard keys. We also go teach them editing navigation and use of like “save as” dialogues to save it in locations/rename it. So, there's actually a lot going on, even at the keyboard level.



Then they transition into what we refer to as the Teka centrist class, which is really the first part of Windows training where they really start to focus on [for example] “Here's the start menu. Here's how we use it. Here's the ribbon in the Office apps here's how we use it.” And we develop those skill sets, so it becomes natural to them, a natural cadence. If I ask you to go somewhere, even if you haven't been there before, you know how to navigate it to where you could locate that. Tech Essentials and Tech Work are really the Windows courses broken into two pieces. If you go through that, you will be a strong swimmer in the operating system, but more and more of our students are college bound or they're even even—say they were doing another profession that no longer is a possibility because of the loss of vision. It requires sight. So, they're back to college to retool. So, we developed some focus courses which are more advanced and really go into the depths of the Office applications like Microsoft Word. We have a Web e-mail class where we focus on Outlook and then just general strategies for surfing the web with JAWS. We have an Excel course that is super in depth to the extent where you would probably be considered an Excel guru if you complete it successfully and retain what you've learned. We have a PowerPoint course. We mainly know that now in school all students blind or you know or sighted will have to deal with PowerPoint, whether it's viewing presentations or creating them. A lot of times as part of the class you've got to create a presentation. And then of course, all of us in the world today are loving our smartphones and our smartphones are just little computers we hold in our hands. So, we've developed an iOS training course for iOS-style devices, and we have an Android device course for Android users. Also, alongside, we may teach people to use refreshable braille displays, OCR programs like Kurzweil or Open Book. And then finally, though, I would say that we do whatever needs to get done in the name of training for our customers here at the center.

### Jeff Molzow: 11:05

The overriding goal of all of our departments and all the skills we train in are to help that student become employment ready by the time they graduate our program. Our Career Guidance Department instructors help our students develop job search skills and documentation that they will need to find competitive integrated employment. Here's Supervisor Ada Mendoza to tell you more.

### Ada Mendoza: 11:28

Our career guidance team is a team of 8 instructors who provide services to adults who are 18+ with preparatory job readiness services. Instructors meet with students and take them through the journey, through system and proactive exploration in pursuit of the vocational goal. Each instructors have their own style on how they teach, however, they use our curriculum to guide the process with each student. The uniqueness is that they take each student and utilize their talents, as well as determining areas that they are not too familiar with to determine where to spend more time throughout the curriculum.

The classroom can be a traditional room with computer researching information online or using the community as their classroom. A combination of the two can support the student in learning



and gaining confidence experienced by networking with individuals within interest careers, meeting mentors by conducting informational interviews with other blind students working in similar jobs and learning about different jobs by doing job observations and/or participating in a work experience that might be paid or a volunteer basis.

All of these activities can provide the students with a fuller perspective on the world of work, with knowledge, expectations, and real-life experiences. Through that process are able to re-identify their ability and how they can apply those skills in a job setting. We typically start them with an assessment and gather information to see how much they might know in career guidance and then develop a direction in terms of where we start. The objective always is to promote vocational growth, increase in knowledge and the world of work, through interactive activities in the classroom, which includes activities within the center and the community.

### Jeff Molzow: 13:34

It takes a lot of people working behind the scenes to both support our students and the operations here at CCRC. Deputy director Trey Shaw manages two of them.

### Trey Shaw: 13:45

Here at Criss Cole, I oversee a couple different departments. I'm overseeing our counseling department along with our outreach department. So, counseling is a set of four rehabilitation counselors for all of our customers that are here at Criss Cole. So, they have field counselors that are in charge of their active cases back home. But when they come here, our counselors are able to take care of all of their needs within our system. So, they're going to be the ones that sign IPE's – like help craft them with their students, make sure they're getting their informed choices when picking vendors and the services that they have here and helping coordinate their program so they can get the training that they need. They also provide counseling and guidance to our students. The outreach team is actually a team that provides training, mostly outside of the center. So, it provides short term trainings throughout the state. They travel and one of the key trainings that they do is what's called a mini training. Our mini training is a week-long confidence building program in which they teach braille and cooking skills. They teach industrial arts, O&M – really a lot of basic blindness skills.

It's kind of like a booster shot of confidence so that people that really haven't been introduced to blindness skills yet can really get a grasp of what they are and start to feel that bit of independence.

### Jeff Molzow: 15:16

When we return, we'll find out more about how our students live when they're not training, and we'll learn more about what brought of our staff to CCRC. That's all right here. When Blind Frontiers continues.



## Program Break: 15:29

The Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center is an innovative residential teaching facility located in Austin, Texas that helps individuals who are blind or deafblind acquire daily living skills that will lead to independence, education and employment. As the largest vocational rehabilitation teaching facility in the United States, our mission is for students to graduate with the confidence and competence to succeed in work, life, and their community. Criss Cole is part of the Vocational Rehabilitation Division within the Texas Workforce Commission. The Texas Workforce Commission is a state agency dedicated to helping Texas employers, workers and their communities prosper economically. For details on the TWC and the services it offers in coordination with its network of local workforce development boards, call five one, two, four, six, three, eight, nine, four, two. Or visit us on the web at [WWW dot Texas workforce dot org](http://WWW.Texasworkforce.org).

## Jeff Molzow: 16:25

Welcome back to Blind Frontiers. I'm Jeff Molzow. At CCRC, we have a number of different training programs depending on student need. Our day student program allows students living in and around the Austin area to commute to Criss Cole daily to attend training. We have a number of career-focused and job retention programs which are shorter and focus on one particular area of training. In the summer we offer a number of group skills training classes. These are normally shorter in duration and focused on transitional students. During these programs, students are trained for the first week in job searching and interviewing skills, after which, they're given the opportunity to practice those skills by working in a local Austin area business. These work experiences allow the student to develop good workplace habits, learn and practice soft skills and focus on their vocational goal. In our residential program, students both train and live at Criss Cole for several months. We have thirty-eight dormitory style bedrooms and excellent food services and recreational opportunities. Here's residential supervisor Rebecca Muzquiz to tell you more about her area.

## Rebecca Muzquiz: 17:34

There's a lot of departments here that I think make up the backbone, but I think that our department and also food service are a huge part of what keeps us running as a center. Residential is a very special place, because, you know, after five O clock, when folks get to

check out and forget about work sometimes you know we're here. But our department does a lot of things where we assess students where they are in the skills to maintaining and managing their own rooms, you know, or even just upkeep of of what they may have done at home. So, home and personal management is a real important piece where we assess and build on the skills that they have and then help them where they feel that they need a little extra help. So, that can be in the area of laundry. That can be in the area of cleaning. Knowing how to zone, you know when they sweep and mop and and giving them honest and realistic feedback so as not to give them information that might hinder them later. So, I always tell the students that, you know, one day you're either going to be living on your own if you haven't already, you're going to be someone 's partner that you're going to live with, or a college roommate or maybe coworkers





who end up finding a place together. You want to be the best possible housemate as you can. So, home and personal management I value a lot, and we have some great teachers for that. We do dining skills. Again, an assessment. We'll go over to the cafeteria and do some observations on students, you know and again, give them feedback. So, it may be that a student we notice that they're picking something up with their hands that normally would need to be used, you know, fork and knife with that or spoon. Maybe they're using the wrong tool for the job, and we observe that and also have classes with them so that we can work with them on those skills. And that's again, everybody comes with a different skill set and different experiences and some experiences that family members may just not allow them to have at no fault of their own, right. Another thing that we do is, you know, minor mending and sewing. You know, just some skills that you need in your life to...the button falls off and you don't throw away the whole shirt, right. Minor mending, sewing, patching, organizing – how to identify the clothes that you have, how to organize it in a way where you know exactly where that is, and again, using different techniques, whether it's restricted, you know the least restrictive adaptation where you're not having to braille everything, but you can identify things using other methods. Beyond just the classes that we teach, I have very helpful staff who can assist with smaller things like oh, you know, I'm not sure why I can't get onto the Wi-Fi or I'm trying to order something through Amazon or what have you and we're available and you know, we have staff here who's tech savvy, you know, we assist in those areas where it's a learning opportunity, not so much giving an answer because I think even after five and on the weekends, there's always opportunity to teach.

### Jeff Molzow: 21:11

As you can tell, our staff is very dedicated, passionate and love what they do. But what brings somebody to a blindness training center? Here again is Ada Mendoza

### Ada Mendoza: 21:21

I started my career in vocational rehab with the blind in Las Vegas, Nevada. I was a vocational rehab counselor there and loved it. I was hooked. It felt like a perfect fit for me. So, when I knew, I was coming to live in Austin, Texas, I started looking for opportunities that would fit me, something similar. And I found Criss Cole. I fell in love. It was the best combination. It allowed me to grow as a counselor, but it also allowed me to to work with my students. I believe that we give the people the opportunity to find their niche while they're here at Criss Cole. And it's not always easy, but if you stick with it, students will grow.

### Jeff Molzow: 22:17

Again, here is Rebecca Muzquiz.

### Rebecca Muzquiz: 22:19

I didn't know anything about blindness. When I saw a job opening for a career guidance administrative assistant, I thought I'm going to give it a shot. By the time they called me, I had to



remember you know, what it was I applied for. And the gentleman said, “But before I even offer you an interview, you'll have to be willing to go under blindfold for six weeks.” And I thought these people are crazy. I just want to file papers and answer phones. Why would I ever put a blindfold on? Best thing that ever happened to me and I will tell you I took on the challenge. I went through the immersion training, and it changed a lot about myself. I learned a lot about myself. It really confirmed for me what is taught here and after doing so, I wanted to continue pursuing my degree so that I could be a teacher here because I liked it that much. I really loved what the teachers did. It means a lot to me. It's what I think I was supposed to be doing all along, and I practically grew up in this building—20-something years, right. I do it because I believe in the philosophy. I do it because I see what we do works. And one of the biggest Aha! moments for me was when I saw that we would hire our students from the past. You know that would come in after getting the skills they needed. They became qualified applicants and and they were competing with everybody else and when I see that we as a Center hire ex-students. To me, that's the biggest compliment to what we do here.

### Jeff Molzow: 23:55

Center Director Julie Johnson.

### Julie Johnson: 23:57

So, you know, I had a counseling background before I came to Criss Cole. But I always wanted to help people who are blind and visually impaired. I wanted to give back in some way. I first started at Criss Cole in 2001 I believe it was. And I was a teacher and I learned how to teach braille and daily living skills. So, teaching students how to cook safely and rely on those alternative techniques. Teaching them organizational skills, you know, really getting to know them and what some of their challenges were and really figuring out ways to empower them to build their confidence. And I I really enjoyed teaching and it was a really good fit for me.

### Jeff Molzow: 24:46

So, after hearing all this, you may be thinking, wow, maybe blindness training is for me. But I'm still just not sure. We asked our staff for some advice about that too.

### Staff 1: 24:57

I think that a willingness to try new things and maybe scary things. It's important to be willing to do that and also a willingness to trust your teacher because they're smart people and they have lots of experience and they can really help you if you let them.

### Staff 2: 25:12

Meet a blind person. Talk to them. Think that's an important thing. Unfortunately, a lot of people, they're only interaction with a blind person is...think of like Mister Magoo, like something you see on TV or something that's like just some ridiculousness right. Like not really connected at all to reality, or they see just some of these TV shows where blind people just look so inept. The





one person they knew that was blind is someone that's you know retired and stays at home and they're staying at home because they're retired and that's what they do, not because they're blind, but that's what they think that blind people do. And so, I think that's a big part is just getting to meet capable blind people and see what they can do.

### Staff 3: 25:56

I would suggest that they're prepared for it. That if they don't have the skill level to live independently, work on those things before you consider coming, because it'll be that much easier for you. Sometimes it's not the right time and I tell students, sometimes it might not be the right time for you right now. Because you're leaving a lot of things at home, whether you're the main provider or you're still dealing with counselling or what have you dealing with loss. You want to make it the best experience you can while you're here. You want to make sure that you try to come at the best possible time.

### Staff 4: 26:33

The main advice I give people when they are thinking about blindness skills training is to stay in the moment. Be present. Be patient with yourself in the process and be flexible to a different way of how to do things. As adults, we develop routine and a specific way of how to do things. A training provides an opportunity for individuals to learn a different way how to do something. Be more efficient and give the person options on how to do something which in turns makes them better. Blindness training is not easy. It is mentally and physically tiring. But so worth it at the end.

### Staff 5: 27:14

Confident. In other words, they know that things are going to come up for them because, you know, as I talked about before, we live in a visual world. So, we know that things are going to come up that the student with vision loss is going to have to face.

But with that confidence, I think students are able to problem solve. Seeing them be confident, seeing them be able to talk about what's going on with them or being able to share about their blind and visual impairment experience. You know, are they able to talk about it? Are they able to articulate what they need. You know, to me, those are important things as well as you know showing that they feel confident that they feel comfortable in their skin.

### Jeff Molzow: 27:58

And that brings us to the conclusion of this edition of Blind Frontiers. We hope you've enjoyed the journey through blindness training, and it has been a great learning experience for you. This is only part one of our welcome to CCRC series. Next week, in part two, you'll have a chance to meet some of our students. Please feel free to share this episode with your friends and family. Blind Frontiers is available anywhere you get your podcasts. I'm Jeff Molzow for Blind Frontiers. Thanks for listening.



## Jessica Glasebrook 28:32

Thank you for listening to Blind Frontiers, a production of the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center. You can find out more about this show and all of our other episodes at [Blind Frontiers dot org](http://BlindFrontiers.org). For more information about the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center. Please call our admissions department at five, one, two, three, seven, seven, zero, three, four, zero.