



Blind Frontiers Podcast Episode 2 Transcript

Welcome to CCRC (Part 2)

October 23, 2023

Jeff Molzow

Well, you did it. You decided that a blindness training center is your next step towards independence. And you've done all kinds of reading. You talked to your counselors, you talked to friends, and you still got questions. Things like, what is the training day like? What kind of subjects can I learn? What are my instructors like? How long do I need to stay?

What kind of support will I receive while I'm in training? These are all great questions and questions you should be asking. This is a big step taking on a new phase of your life, and it's important to get all the information you can. We hope to answer these questions and more in this edition of Blind Frontiers.

Jessica Intro: 00:49

Welcome to Blind Frontiers, a production of the Chris 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

And thank you so much, Jessica, and welcome to Blind Frontiers. Indeed, I am your host, Jeff Molzow and I am so glad you decided to join us on another journey into the blindness experience. This is actually part two of a series we call welcome to CCRC. In part one, you had a chance to meet some of the staff and hear about some of the departments at CCRC. In this episode, we'd like to introduce you to some of our students. You'll get a chance to meet current students in the program. You'll have a chance to meet alumni and see where their journeys have taken them after they attended CCRC. And finally, you're going to have the chance to meet some graduates and hear what their next steps are going to be after they leave our program. Students come to Criss Cole from all over Texas with varying eye conditions and their stories and their reasons for coming to CCRC are as unique as they are. Let's meet a few.

Caitlin: 02:12:00

My name is Caitlin. I'm from La Feria, Texas, down in the Valley. I have stickler syndrome. So, as a kid, I had a retinal detachment, and I had a series of so many other things that happened, about, to a span of ten years. So, I have technically been legally blind for the last two years. Realistically, I have been legally blind probably for the last decade and a half probably.



I plan on being a rehabilitation counselor. I was just having a really hard time functioning as a person and everything that I had been doing up to that point was no longer working. And so, by the end of 2022, I couldn't even pretend to read paper. I was having a really hard time – I was already having accidents without a cane for years to begin with, but just things like that. And it was getting very frustrating because I was having a hard time doing my job at work, and it wasn't even a difficult job. It was just the fact that I couldn't do basic things. And I needed constant help and I didn't have accommodations. It was very, very difficult and very overwhelming, especially since I lost half of my vision in about a six-month span.

So, I didn't have a lot of time to adjust, and my attempts to adjust weren't going well. And, by the time that I got my case manager through TWC, I told him, like, I would like to go to Chris Cole because I would rather go to a residential facility. I don't care where it's at, and I'd rather just knock out my training as opposed to have somebody coming to my house once or twice a month and have that take years.

Before coming here, I had never met another blind person in my age range. I look at the social aspect of it more than like the actual training, because the actual training I appreciate, I like it, and these are skills that I'm going to use for the rest of my life. I think it's just – it's all about your frame of mind, and I know it's so much easier said than done. I think it's just in terms of how you look at yourself. Like, you know, disability isn't an ugly word.

Christian: 04:16

I'm Christian and I'm from Kingsbury, Texas. I have ROP, retinopathy of prematurity. I have a little bit of light perception in the right eye light perception. I have nothing in the left eye. The retina is a little bit attached in the right eye. It's fully detached to the left eye. Honestly, I think I heard about it from a combination of my TWC counselor and then my friend Marshall, I think also mentioned it. I want to go work for some sort of tech company. I actually just got an idea from my CG (counseling and guidance) instructor that he thought I would be really good in a sales position, and so that's something that I'm kind of looking into now.

Kim: 05:00

I am Kim and I am from Rosenberg, Texas. I will start with some light perception. They have not been able to give it a specific diagnosis. They call it sero negative, which means we're going to treat it. But she has none of the symptoms or tests positive for any of those. To my understanding is neuropathy of the optic nerve – anything that would lend itself to that, I test negative for it. I really am a caregiver. So, putting my professional realm to my heartfelt realm and merging those people together where I can. I mean, I do it every day on the bus like, 'hey did you know that this happened, or do you know this person?' I can't give you their number, but I, I love to connect, save me exponentially because before I could get in... post-Covid etc. I am, you know, I'm independent, I'm stubborn, I can figure it out, I can figure it out. And I had ways. Because I couldn't get in for like two years or a year and a half. And when I got here I'm had that ah ha. Oh, that's how you do it. So, a game changer. Time saver. Because two years ago I didn't



understand blindness. And now in the perspective my family does not understand blindness. It's been very enlightening. And why wouldn't you if you want to figure it out and take the long route, go for it. It's not a disability. It's not, it's not a disability. So, we're star athletes in a different realm.

Gabrielle: 06:51

Hi, I am Gabrielle, and I am from The Woodlands which is outside of Houston. So, I have optic nerve hypoplasia.

And I also have something called oculogyric crisis which the optic nerve hypoplasia I've had since birth. It is where the optic nerve doesn't fully develop. So, I moved here to Texas two years ago and was realizing that I did not have a lot of the basic skills that sighted young adults have from childhood, like learning how to use a computer and improving my job skills and daily living skills like cleaning. So, I heard about this from place from a friend a previous graduate, and I have felt like I have found this place to be amazing. I've made some of my best friends here. I have learned so much. I made a cutting board. I never thought I'd be able to make things like that. It. It means so much that I've learned so much. And I've been here for a few months. Hundred percent would recommend it. Even if you have a lot of skills, it will elevate those to a point where like you and sighted person could both make something and you might get there differently, but they'd be the same work.

Jeff Molzow: 08:23

Do you remember that old sitcom from the 70s? The one where a teacher comes back after many years to teach at the same high school where he was a student?

It turns out that that's not uncommon for many professionals in the VR community. Case in point. Two of our counselors actually were students at CCRC, and now, after reaching the epitome of their careers, they have returned to CCRC to give back and to share with our students.

Rafelina Emauang: 08:52

My name is Rafinha Imong, and I'm a counselor at the Criss Cole center, and I've been a counselor now for 13 years.

Diana Carter: 08:58

My name is Deanna Carter and I am a vocational rehabilitation counselor at Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center.

Rafelina Emauang

Well, I've had you know, I always had a pretty successful career. And, but when I lost my vision – I always tell people – it's like, you know, I had a kid, and it's probably worse than childbearing.



I just, you know, you would think somebody educated would be able to handle your emotions. I didn't. I mean, I was very emotional. I didn't have any skills. I quit dreaming, Jeff. I didn't know what a blind person could do. I had no skills. I just, I felt like, why plan for tomorrow if I can? I mean, I can barely get through to today. I can even check my mail. I shuffled my feet. I tried to cook, the smoke detector was going off. It was really tough for me. I didn't think I was going to go back to work, and even when I could type, I was, you know, finger pecking. I knew 'A' was on the left-hand side. And now I had to learn home. Well, I mean, just simple things that people take for granted, you know, for me. And now I learned a lot of the skills. And sometimes it's like common sense, like, you know, you could use it for anywhere. But when you're scared and you don't know any way and just simple ways, some of the things we teach people, you could use it even if you weren't blind. So, the same two ways of cutting, you know, vegetables and things like that. So, I would say with a lot of work experience and no blind skills, the training program opened my eyes and it changed my life. And that's why I became a counselor.

Diana Carter

I've been the counselor going on four years here pretty quick in December. I started my career with TWC as a vocational rehabilitation teacher in El Paso. I have retinosa pigmentosa, also known as RP. But at the time that I came to Criss Cole, the only person that I knew with Vision Loss was one of my brothers, and so I had not met anyone else who was blind. I can say I that that I did not know how to use a cane. At the time I did not know Braille because I was very, very recently, you know, I guess considered blind at that point. So, when I came out to Criss Cole, you know, it's just very been a little daunting at first because there was this, you know, this huge building. How am I going to get around? How am I get going to get to the cafeteria and not spill my food? How am I going to learn to walk independently? And so, all of those things, you know, were running through my mind at the time. I was in my, you know, my mid 20s. Vision loss was very new to me at that time for myself in my life. You know, I quickly learned, you know, how to start going around with the cane, getting around this huge building all of a sudden going beyond this building and crossing streets, finding stores, you know, finding different addresses, shopping on my own, starting to cook again. Not visually, you know, because I had been sighted up until then.

So, you know, learning how to cook safely, chop safely, doing some career exploration. I didn't quite know what I was going to do beyond Criss Cole, but I can say that when I left Criss Cole, I knew in my heart that I wanted to come back as a counselor one day.

Jeff Molzow 0:12:15

So, the results are clearly worth it. But what's it like to train on a day-to-day basis? Here's producer Jessica Glazebrook to give us just a little insight.



Jessica Glasebrook 0:12:23

So, your packet is complete, you've got your intake date and it's time for you to come to Criss Cole. Some of our students might be nervous and wondering what to expect. This is completely normal. Blindness can be an exciting new experience, but it's not without its challenges. Let's take a look at an average day at CCRC. We model our training days after the traditional work week. Meaning that students are in training from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. At CCRC, we are blessed with an amazing cafeteria and dedicated kitchen staff. Breakfast starts at 7:15 and usually includes all the breakfast staples with an occasional delicacy like French toast. Our cafeteria staff wants you to feel at home, and that usually starts with home cooking. Your first class will start at 8 am. We have four core classes that students take throughout the day. In technology class, you might start by learning touch typing skills using a screen reader like Jaws. When you get more advanced, you'll start to learn programs like Microsoft Office, the Google Suite, and Mobile device techniques for your iPhone or Android. In orientation and mobility, you'll start by getting used to using your cane and traveling in the building. Using a cane can seem scary at first, but a cane is your ticket to freedom. It lets you travel wherever you need to go safely and efficiently. After you've gotten used to your cane, you'll start venturing out with your instructor to work on intersections, navigating address systems, and using public transportation. Eventually, you'll have these adventures on your own. In career guidance, you'll start to explore your goals and plans for the future. You'll also start learning some fundamental skills of job searching, such as writing your resume and acing a job interview. One of the most important parts of career guidance is creating your ability statement. An ability statement is a way to talk about your vision loss that focuses on your strengths, abilities, and the tools you use to be the talented person you are. In daily living skills you'll start by seeing what you know in Braille and in the kitchen. Your instructors may start at the beginning and work through some beginner braille, such as learning dot positions, as well as kitchen fundamentals like locating items on the stovetop and safely centering a pan. Well, it's after 5:00 and you've had a rich full day and a home cooked dinner from our cafeteria staff. Wait, there's more. Our recreation team is here to work with you on getting your life back after vision loss. Our Therapeutic Recreation faculty journey with you to set goals for your hobbies and interests and create accessible plans for you to try these activities at the Center and at home. They are experts in the impossible and have taught everything from pottery to hiking to tandem cycling to accessible archery. If you name it, they can think of 100 ways a blind person can do it. Students often have assignments for classes that can be completed for homework, such as practicing technology concepts. And it's very common to see people studying in groups. Criss Cole is located in vibrant central Austin, and there are plenty of opportunities to socialize on weekends. Many students make lifelong friendships at CCRC and develop a true sense of community on their journey in blindness.



Jeff Molzow: 0:16:11

When we come back, we'll meet some students who have completed their training at CCRC and are ready to start out on the next part of their journey. All that and more when Blind Frontiers continues.

Program Break

The Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center is an innovative residential teaching facility located in Austin, Texas that helps individuals who are blind or deaf blind acquired 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 (512) 463-8942 or visit us on the web at www.texasworkforce.org.

Jeff Molzow

You're listening to Blind Frontiers and I'm Jeff Malzow. There's a lyric to a popular song that goes, every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end. And that's a very apt metaphor.

As students finish and leave our training program at CCRC, they've walked many miles around Austin, read and written hundreds of pages of Braille, and they've learned all the independence and employment ready skills they need to go on to their next adventure. As it would happen, as we recorded this episode, CCRC held a graduation, and we thought this would be a fantastic opportunity for you to hear the voices of our students and hear what their next steps are going to be. We'll start off with Center Director Julie Johnson.

Julie Johnson: 0:17:58

Good afternoon graduates! You did it! You all had courage to come to Criss Cole. And that does take courage to face your fears. To learn new things. To challenge yourselves as well as be challenged. But I just want to say from here now, this point on - your journey continues. Some of you are in school or going to school. We also have folks who are doing self-employment, so we've had a lot of great things going on. But the journey continues, and I want to tell you all to have courage as you move forward. Take those courageous jumps because you're going to need to. You're going to need to do that to put yourself out there. You want to keep your momentum going. You don't want to lose momentum. You're going to go out there and continue to be courageous and to take those jumps because with that, taking those jumps, it moves you forward, it builds your confidence, and eventually you guys are going to be living the life that you



want. The challenges will continue to come. You just have better problem-solving skills. Staff, family, friends, students. Great job. Yeah, you can do this!

Student 1: 0:19:27

So, in February 2020, I found out I was losing my sight due to retinitis pigmentosa. The doctors thought I would have decades before I would be too affected by the vision loss. But my vision was going fast. By the time I arrived here at Criss Cole, I only had five degrees in my peripheral. Coming here, I didn't know what to expect. I knew I needed to learn everything I could to become an independent blind person.

Student 2: 0:19:48

The teachers in the IA class helped me see that losing my sight wasn't going to stop me from taking on the world however I wanted to. I managed to make a coffee table without sight. That is not one of my most precious items that I own. All my teachers that have been there for me have left a mark on my life. No matter if it was one class that I spent with them or the entire program, I came in scared and I'm feeling like I can do more than I ever thought possible. This place will always have a special place in my heart. The teachers and staff have been everything to me, but also the friends I have made. I've been able to connect and make friends that I hope are also there for a lifetime. They got me through the days that were not the easiest. They motivated me, encouraged me and turned into my family. Thank you to everyone here. You got to me. I got here because of you.

Student 3: 0:20:31

Good afternoon, family and graduates. I just want to say welcome all to this wonderful ceremony. First of those, I want to talk about my journey here at Criss Cole. So first, I would like to thank my DLS instructors, Joan Justice, for helping me improve my Braille skills and cooking skills. I had so much fear using the stove, but since Justice will tell me you can do this, you can do this like I was. I'm really used to it now. And now I'll be showing my family how to improve those skills at home. Wonderful island and for all the staff and instructors. Thank you all so much for helping me improve these skills. I'm going to miss you all so much. Thank you for all my friends who taught me how to work through and also for helping me improve the skills that I needed to learn. Congratulations fellow students and thank you.

Student 4: 0:21:34

It was a teaching experience here, unlike the ones that you usually have in school. The ones that expect you to learn a certain way. Here everything is adaptable and to somebody as stubborn as I am, it was perfect. To somebody who wanted to succeed in my own way. It was perfect. You know, I don't usually talk about myself, as I said but I'm affording myself the opportunity, and I think everybody up here should do the same. Because this is our day. I want



to leave you all with a quote. Just remember that it will all be okay in the end. And if it's not okay, it's not the end.

Student 5: 0:22:19

Two years ago, I was in high school, senior year of high school at an early college (high school). Sophomore year through junior year, I noticed a drop in what was left of my vision.

And for three years, I told nobody about it. For three years, I tried to pretend like it wasn't happening. For three years, I tried to play the part of a sighted person. I tried to play the part of what I thought was normal. Three years later – it blew up in my face. It took not getting my degree to realize, just like Marco, that something wasn't right. I never opened up to my family or friends about what was going on. I was born with a genetic condition that would mean I would lose what little sight I had. We didn't know when. I came to Criss Cole, scared. I came to Criss Cole not feeling like I had a future. I came to Criss Cole to rebuild the life that I felt I had lost. And here I am. Nine months later and I have accepted an internship with a prestigious organization of organized people with disabilities where I will be advocating for the rights of those of us who are disabled. For those of you who were in my spot. For those of you who are new to CCRC who may have just gotten here, I want you to remember that being disabled doesn't make you broken. It may have broken you down, but you can take the pieces of what's left and create a life for yourself. Something better. So, for those of you out there. Learn to embrace your blindness. Learn to be okay. Because you're not broken. Learn to be comfortable with the uncomfortable. It's all about growth. Growth isn't comfortable. They're not synonymous. You have to hurt a little bit to grow.

Student 6: 00:24:24

Gandhi once said in a gentle way, you can shake the world. My journey here started in a hospital bed on April the 1st, 2022 – 18 days before my 54th birthday. I woke up without any sight after being on a ventilator for eight days. And I thought about what my life was going to be. I didn't see any hope. I didn't see any light. I mean, not in a real way too. And I didn't have a future. I've lived a life that most people only dream about. I've got to figure out a way to live and new life. I could choose hope. My dear friend, before I even left the hospital, called a phone number for me. And she got me on the phone with Texas Workforce Commission. And that started my journey here. As you go forward from here, please advocate for your community because we are your community. The other thing is kindness. You may be the only visually impaired blind person that someone may interact with in their entire lives, and you have an opportunity in that moment to be a teacher, to give that person a perception that they never thought they would have and so when the next person comes along, they're willing to take that step and reach out to help. Amelia Earhart once said, 'a gentle act of kindness throws out roots and those roots will sprout up new trees.'



Student 7: 0:26:13

Criss Cole's been my life for the last year. I've been extremely grateful to every single person that's here. I'm not sure how I made it. There was many times where I thought I was going to walk out the door. I know I was terrified. That first day when I had to wear that blindfold. Because I'm mostly sighted, so I can see most things. But when you're here, you got to learn with the blindfold. It finally made sense to what I wanted to do. So now, right now, I'm in the middle of pursuing my Recovery Support Peer Specialist Certification. I just finished my classroom training for it. And the next steps for that is to complete my 250 field hours. And so that's the next step for when I leave here. There aren't enough words to to thank every single person who's made an impact in my life in the last year. Thank you to each and every one of you.

Student 8: 0:27:17

I, like a lot of people, had lost my vision recently, within the last two years, I think. And, I was trying to explain, you know, people ask – how did it happen? What's it like? The thing that keeps coming in my mind is that my life was kind of like a snow globe. You're kind of round and kind of cute. I could sit on a shelf and be quiet, until you came, like, shook me up. Then I'm sparkly and loud and vivacious. But, two years ago, some power greater than myself came and just slammed that snow globe on the ground. How am I going to clean this all up? What do I do with this? But I got to do something. I can't leave it all on the floor. And, like all of us here, my friends here that showed up today, they are what Otis calls foundation. You need a foundation to bring us to build anything that's strong and resilient and these people that showed up, they're my foundation. So, after you have the strong foundation, and then you have the pieces to put back together and hold together. And like everyone has said here, too, it's the staff here. Front of the house. Back of the house. I was asking myself, like, what have I learned since I started Criss Cole? And the first thing that pops in my mind is patience. From the first day I walked in, I was just in awe of the patience that you all have with all of us and the kindness. I've also realized that I'm very, very lucky to have all of you in this room. I literally would not be standing here on Metro – day in, day out – without the support or the kind words or the the patience of each and every person in this room.

Jeff Molzow: 0:29:04

So many voices. Voices of joy. Voices of success. Voices of independence. These are just a few of the many voices that have graduated from CCRC. We hope you've enjoyed this introduction to CCRC and will come back again to listen to a few more of our voices as we take more journeys into the blindness experience. Executive Producers for Blind Frontiers are Jessica Glasebrook and Jeff Molzow. Thanks for listening.



Jessica Glasebrook: 00:29:36

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 BlindFrontiers.org. For more information about the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center, please call our admissions department at (512) 377-0340.