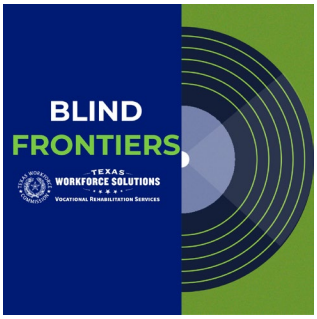


Blind Frontiers Podcast Episode 3 Transcript

Have Cane Will Travel

November 4, 2023

Jeff Molzow

One of the greatest expressions of freedom is the ability to travel. To know where you want to go, when you want to go, and how you choose to get there, is truly blindness independence. Walt Whitman once said, ‘neither I nor anyone else can travel that road for you. You must travel yourself.’ For a blind person, the training to travel independently is called orientation and mobility, or O & M for short. On today's episode, we have a conversation between two orientation and mobility specialists. Both of them happen to be blind. They should make excellent guides into our blind frontiers.

Jessica Glasebrook Program Intro: 0:40

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: 01:08

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to travel with that white cane –how it works, how does it pick up information about the world around you? Well, if you have, this show is for you. We have got two super experts on mobility and orientation, and just getting around places. I want to first introduce my amazing producer, and now I find out she's an O & M instructor, Miss Joni Martinez.

Joni Martinez: 01:34

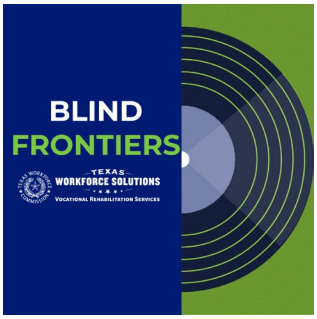
Hey, everybody. And I'm excited to talk a little bit about O&M.

Jeff Molzow: 01:37

And you are a certified O&M Instructor, right?

Joni Martinez: 01:40

I am, I have a national Orientation & Mobility Certification.



Jeff Molzow: 01:44

And sitting right beside you in the chair, our copilot for today, we have one of our O&M Specialists from Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center, Mr. Andrew Burnett.

Andrew Burnett: 01:54

Hey, thank y'all for having me here today.

Jeff Molzow: 01:57

And you are also a Certified O&M, correct.

Andrew Burnett: 02:00

I am, I am a Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist.

Jeff Molzow: 02:04

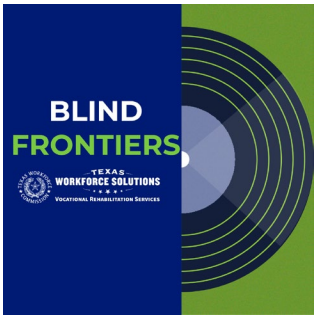
And tell me a little bit about yourself, Drew. How did you get started in this and what are your travel experiences like?

Andrew Burnett: 02:10

So, I first found out about Orientation & Mobility actually when I went blind. I went blind when I was 22. I'm type one diabetic, have been since I was three and, it just caught up with me in my 20s. I got rear-ended coming home from work one day at a vet clinic and, literally went to sleep that night and next day I woke up and it was like looking through sheet of wax paper. Started receiving Orientation & Mobility services. And at the time I was in college, trying to figure out what I might be able to switch my career goal to and really started picking up on O&M training. I was like, this is really cool, this is fun. And, actually ended up getting into O&M. While I was in college, I did, of course, learned how to travel with my cane first. I've always been an animal person. The degree I was trying to get before I went blind was to become an equine veterinarian. So, I kind of naturally went to, 'hey, what would it be like to travel with a dog?' Went through the process of getting a dog guide from Guide Dogs for the Blind up at the Portland, Oregon campus. And, yeah, went around through college with my dog, and now I've been working as an O&M now for about five years and got a guide dog several years ago, and then been a cane traveler since. It's definitely been a lot easier working as an O&M using my cane as opposed to my dog.

Jeff Molzow: 03:40

Joni, tell us your background. We know a lot about you from being on this podcast, but people probably don't know about your O&M experience.



Joni Martinez: 03:47

I have retinitis pigmentosa and started losing my vision pretty young. I started taking O&M lessons when I was in high school. And of course, I, you know, proceeded to do so until I completely lost my vision and became a full-time cane user. When I got older, of course, I realized how much I love O&M and the importance of it. And so I decided to go ahead and pursue a certification in O&M so I could share that knowledge and experience with other people, and of course, so I could help them regain their independence. And so, I've been certified since 2014, and I love teaching O&M. I've done some O&M in New Mexico. I've taught a little bit of O&M in and out here in Austin. Also, around the state of Texas, and it's just something that I love. I love to talk about it. And here we are.

Jeff Molzow 04:42

Drew. Okay, so what is orientation and mobility – for people who are not familiar with it?

Andrew Burnett: 04:48

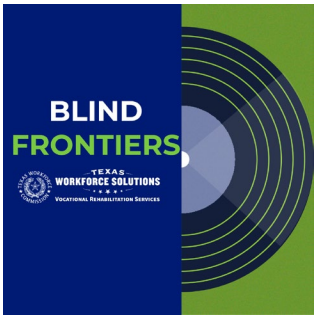
Really, at its essence it's how do you travel around? There's a lot of learning how to make use of spatial concepts and, use, use kind of logic in your other senses. All the information you're getting, gathering up to figure out where you are in space and how to travel through it. A lot of times people think of O&M, stereotypically as cane training. Learning how to use awhite cane. But they, like I said, they are definitely different little offshoots to it. It really comes down to how do I travel?

Jeff Molzow: 05:23

So, what is O&M training like for somebody who is maybe just newly blind or is transitioning or just wants to get better at traveling? What is O&M training like?

Andrew Burnett: 05:35

It's really individualized. There are times where you have, you'll go through training, you'll be in a small group. The largest group I've ever taken out as an instructor has been about four, four individuals at the same time. But it tends to be really intense. Sometimes it can be as simple as, you know, let's learn the simple route from one classroom to another on campus. Other times it's learning how to go, and metaphorically, play in traffic. I always like to joke around with students trying to inject a little bit of levity into the lesson, because it can be real stressful when you're learning. But, you know, we're going to go play in traffic today. I always like to joke with my students as well as, you know, hey, you know, let's go figure out what, what adventure we can have today.



Joni Martinez: 06:31

I agree, I think it's all about adventure. And of course, for some people, like you said, it's very individualized. So, in the beginning, it might be scary for some, it might be exciting for some. But, you know, the important thing to remember is that you're with a trained professional and that it's a skill that's going to build and get easier as you go. So, eventually it's going to give you that independence that you really need and want.

Andrew Burnett: 06:57

Oh yeah. You know, going out there on a lesson, you're out there with your O&M instructor and, and we're, we're constantly, you know, pumping up the stress by answering questions with more questions. But we're also out there as a safety net, you know, we're right there with you, and we're helping you learn how to be independent and travel on your own.

Jeff Molzow: 07:19

Can a blind person truly travel independently? I mean, and what tools what I need to do.

Joni Martinez 07:26

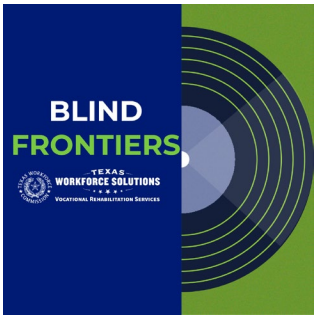
You know, I think that a blind person can definitely travel independently, and everyone is an individual. So, independence kind of comes individually as well. So, some people, you know, they are very adventurous. They love O&M. They're ready to kind of just get up and go and take the city bus to the airport and fly across the country and, you know, explore a new city on their own. And then some people don't want to do that. Some people want to be independent enough so they can go to doctor's appointments and to go grocery shopping. And so, with O&M training, you kind of start to realize what your priorities are and sort of what you want to do with O&M and sort of how independent, how independence is, defined for you. And so, you know, definitely I think that an individual, a blind person, can travel as independently as they need to and as they want to be.

Jeff Molzow: 08:25

Well let's talk about that cane for a minute. This long white stick that I have sitting here next to the console. I guess many of our listeners have seen blind people traveling with canes and they may have seen different types of white canes. Drew, what are the different types of white canes that one might come across?

Andrew Burnett: 08:44

A mobility cane or a long white cane is going to be a lighter device that's a lot longer that blind people use to gain tactile and auditory information from the environment around them to keep from falling down curbs or stairs or running into things. You have, rigid canes, which are all one piece. You have canes that are just white and you have canes that are folding canes. So, they



have different joints that all connect together. There's a little elastic cord in the middle of it and it pulls them onto the different joints on to each other. You have telescopic canes. And all this can be used for the same thing in different circumstances. You also have what are known as identity canes out there, which are kind of about as thick around as a pencil. It's a much shorter white cane, if you will. And it's really – the only real purpose that it has is really just for someone to carry around, to kind of communicate to the world, 'hey, I'm blind, so I, but but I do have vision.' Most of the world doesn't realize that blindness is a spectrum. And so those identity canes are kind of there to kind of head off any questions that the public might have if someone's kind of, acting different and traveling a little bit slower than the rest of public, and in that way, they're kind of just, just aware that this individual is blind.

Jeff Molzow: 10:18

How do I know which cane is right for me?

Andrew Burnett: 10:20

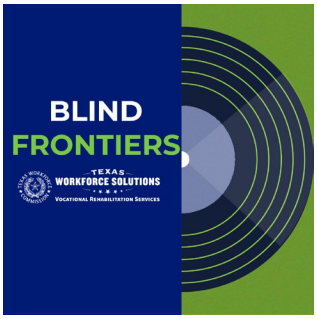
You can work with an Orientation & Mobility Specialist to determine what's going to be the best cane for you. Myself, I have about eight different canes I use, depending on what I'm doing, though. I have my typical day to day cane, everyday use. It's, non folding. I like it because it's nice and light. If I'm, going to be doing a lot of travel, which is the case, you know, when I'm O&M instructor. It's really nice having that lighter cane so that my hand and, my wrist don't get worn out during the day. If I'm going someplace that I'm not going to be doing as much traveling and I'm more going to be just hanging out with some people, whether they're friends or it's some kind of gathering. Then I might use a folding cane. Just to make a little bit easier to store away. You know, again, the identity cane. I can't use one. I my vision is absolutely zero. I have no, no vision at all. I can't even tell if it's light or dark. I like to joke that my blind power is I could stare into the sun as long as I want the.

Jeff Molzow: 11:28

Size of the cane. Okay? I mean, I'm five foot 11 and I use a 63-inch cane, but you know, listening to this and wanting to get better at my cane skills, I think I'd like a nine foot cane. Something that would really tell me about things that were just, you know, really far ahead of me. Joanie, how do you how do you size a cane?

Joni Martinez: 11:47

So, usually when we look at sizing canes, depending on the type of cane that you have, we're going to look at anywhere from basically your chin to your forehead. At Criss Cole, we train generally with the long white cane just because, like Drew said, the rigid cane – all one piece– it's a little bit lighter at times just because there's not components inside of it that make it heavier, like the folding canes tend to be a little bit heavier just because they have the cords inside. So, we look at, kind of first, what kind of cane that you want to use and then we go again,



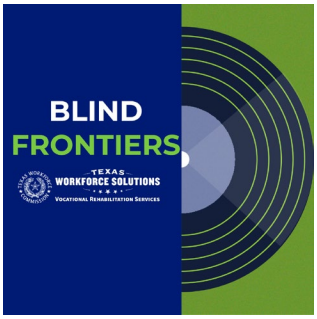
like I said to length. Now when we're using the long white cane, we're going to look at sizing from the chin to the forehead, depending on your height and your stride. So, if you have a pretty long stride, we're going to match you maybe with something about the size, or about to your nose, depending on preference. And then of course, when you, when you first start with cane travel, sometimes we might start you with something shorter, like I said, maybe to your chin or your nose. And then as you get faster and more comfortable with that cane, you might say, is you up to something, you know, nose or forehead. Now, the reason we don't give anyone a nine-foot cane is because, you know, the longer the cane is that the further out it's going to be, which can be good at some times, but also the longer the cane is, the heavier it is, more material, right. But the longer it is the the further distance you are from obstacles. So, we want to give you a decent amount of distance from an obstacle, but not too much to the point where it throws you off more than it should.

Jeff Molzow 13:29

Drew, talk about the different tips and what kind of advantages or disadvantages they have toward navigation.

Andrew Burnett: 13:35

The type of environment, you know what what you're going to be traveling on when you're walking through the city and walking down city blocks is, typically going to be, you know, more more pavement and concrete. It's something that's, a little bit more consistent so that that's, that's not too that's going to be a much different travel experience than if you're, say, walking down a dirt road in the country. And even then, if you go past that, if you're going to be doing a lot of, walking in, say, like a field or on the beach, in snow or, it's it's all going to have a much different experience on, what your tip is actually doing, how it's interacting with that surface that you're walking on. The two main ones that we'll use at the Center here are either the roller ball and it literally looks like a giant -- it's about the size of like a tennis ball. It's on the edge of the cane. It's, it's it's a pretty heavy tip. And because it is such a big tip, it tends to take a lot longer to wear, wear it out. So, it tends to be useful more for, a student who's going to be traveling and they're going to be keeping that cane tip on the ground constantly. The canes that we use, comes standard with what are known as metal glide tips. They're very light too they're made out of steel. They're they're designed more primarily for use with, what's known as two-point touch. And that's kind of where you see people tapping it more side to side. That's that's a really good tip. It's designed for really helping out with echolocation, with your cane. So, each time you tap your cane, it's making a noise which you're then able to use read the environment around you. Kind of similar to that –it's kind of an in-between tip- is the ceramic tip. I do really like ceramic tips personally. They do tend to be heavier. But I like the real crisp sound that I get out of them. Sometimes it's a bit much, walking inside, just because it's, it's a ceramic tip. And whenever you're tapping that on a tile floor it can get pretty loud pretty quickly. The whole deal with the ceramic tip that really people like to emphasize is that ceramic tips, the way that they're fired,



they don't wear down. It is possible to break them, but they don't wear out like, metal tip wood or one of the roller tips when.

Jeff Molzow: 16:20

You talked about tip and the ceramic and standard steel tips, I notice that some blind people, when they travel, they'll do the back and forth, you know, tic tac, tic tac sound. Some people prefer to use a roller ball and just kind of stay always rolling and not move the cane off the ground. Why is that? And what what is the difference in traveling style? How does that help?

Andrew Burnett: 16:45

Well, whenever they're keeping, the cane tip on the ground and sliding it side to side, and that that technique is considered constant contact because the tip of your cane is constantly in contact with the ground. The thing about using that technique is you get a lot more tactile feedback through your cane using constant contact. I try to get my students to can really rely on whenever they're specifically looking for something. So, like a drop off or a grass line, or they're trying to feel the slope, in a driveway. Whenever they're coming up to a curb, really feeling where that, that curb that, at the at the corner of an intersection. But some people do prefer to use that everywhere. If the people who tend to use, two point touch where they're tapping side to side, they tend to use that more so because, again, keeping that cane tip constantly in contact with the ground is providing a lot more information and sometimes that can kind of be information overload for some people.

Joni Martinez: 17:59

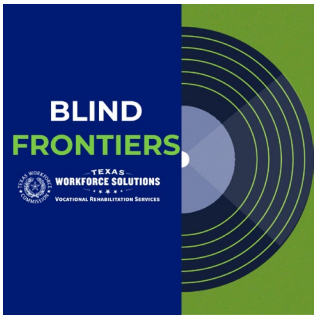
Yeah, I agree, I think that, you know, constant contact. I know I use constant contact a lot more when I'm in an unfamiliar, area or maybe, you know, as, as a female who wears high heels sometimes, constant contact helps a lot more, when I'm not super surefooted, you know? So definitely I like Drew said, I think that's, a personal preference. Also, when individuals tap their canes and, you know, they use two-point touch, there's a lot more kind of audio feedback that comes from that as well. And so, you know, that can provide more information as far as, kind of what's around you based on the sound that it creates.

Jeff Molzow: 18:43

When Blind Frontiers continues, now that you have all the tools you need for travel, we're going to talk about how to use them to explore the world around you.

Program break: 18:54

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. Chris 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 W dot Texas workforce.org.

Jeff Molzow 19:48

Welcome back to Blind Frontiers. We continue now with our conversation with orientation and mobility specialist Drew Burnett and Joni Martinez. Okay, Joni. So, I've got the perfect height cane. I have the perfect tip. What am I going to do with it? How does this work? How is this going to help me travel?

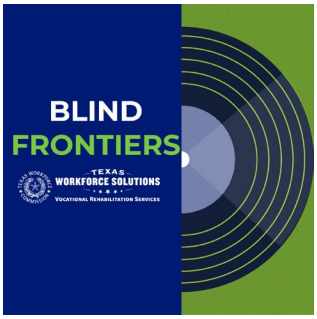
Joni Martinez 20:05

So, when you're traveling with the cane, the aim of the game is that the cane contacts things before you, contacts obstacles, and it contacts just about anything in your environment. When I'm traveling with the cane, it's out in front of me. It's moving from side to side. We clear a path for ourselves with that cane. So, as you're walking, you're, moving the cane from side to side.

You want to move it past you. You want to move it wider than your shoulder width. So that the space is cleared for you to walk is completely open. So, you know, when you walk, you're not going to hit your elbows on anything. You're not going to hit your shoulders on anything. And of course, you're not going to, you know, step anywhere that you don't want to step. When you're walking, you can also, you know, find again obstacles. So, you can make contact with those obstacles. You can actually use your cane to help you make contact with them with. So, you know, you're able to touch the obstacle and get more information about it.

Andrew Burnett: 21:03

There are really two main senses that are considered are distance, senses through weight. There are the senses that really pull in information from far off out of our immediate vicinity. And those are our vision and hearing. Obviously traveling with a cane. That vision's not going to be there for you. So, the remaining distance sense that you really have there is hearing, you learn how to localize in on sounds kind of targets and follow them and use that to pull in information from the environment around you to help with orientation. One of the things that really kind of helps hammer this home for individuals, whenever we first get out, start training, is just walking up and down the street, not even crossing intersections, but definitely crossing driveways and stopping and pausing to listen for how that parallel traffic so that traffic going from back to front or front to back next to them, using the sound of that traffic, really kind of get some kind of direction for which way they need to be heading in order to keep walking straight down the sidewalk. You know, you know, a little caveat that is straight down the sidewalk, assuming that city planners and designers haven't decided to go all artistic with their sidewalk and make it all



wide as it's going along the parallel street, but, you know, the typical sidewalk that's just straight down the street. It really helps, helps that blind traveler, get a good line for the direction they need to travel. There's other senses too though, that you can make use of, when traveling outside. You know, you get the tactile information from, your cane. Dog travelers still do get tactile information. It's not the same kind of tactile information. They don't get as much of it using the, the feeling of warmth from the sun can help people determine which cardinal direction they're heading. Knowing what time of day it is and what what part of the year it is. Just knowing how the sun typically travels and feeling where that sun is in relationship to your body, the tactile feedback in your feet and, feeling, how that slope is in the direction that the slopes go in whenever you're walking around, you know, being able to feel things, information such as slope can help provide information about if you're in a ramp, if you're in a driveway. You know, when you're getting to the middle of a street, even, like, once I get my line, I've, you know, granted, I've had you know, tons of practice and I've I've really gotten used to traveling. I travel now being blind, not having to think about it at all. I did not start off here, but once I get my line, I, you know, I can really kind of just follow students and hover my cane above the, the street and know when I'm in the middle of the street, when I'm starting to get close to the corner, just based off of the, slope in the road.

Jeff Molzow 24:12

What is the echo location you talked about a few minutes ago Drew?

Andrew Burnett: 24:15

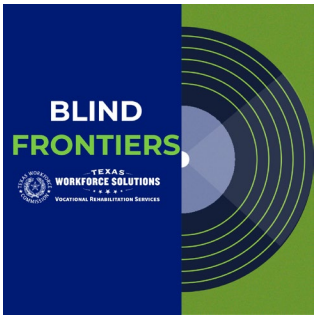
Pretty much like, when, what you would think of whenever you hear echolocation with bats. It's just humans do it, too. It's it's using the echoes from sounds, to build a picture of your environment. You learn how to interpret really little subtle nuances and sounds like that when you're out traveling, in traffic and and and the sound of bushes, having the wind rustle through the leaves as you're walking by them. All these things are useful when you're building a mental map about where you are in space and you're out there traveling.

Jeff Molzow: 24:52

What is the best way for me to advocate for myself, to get the information that I need to get the best information, because sighted people often use obviously visual cues. How can I help someone to help me?

Joni Martinez 25:05

I'd say that the best advice I can give is to make sure that you're always in control of your situation. That means that when you're asking for assistance, which, you know, sometimes we have to, that you're you're getting the information that you need and that you know how to get that information. So, when we're chatting with sighted individuals and asking for directions, like



you said, Jeff, they they might say, it's over there. It's over there. It's that way. It's, you know, behind you, whatever it may be. And they might point with their finger, you know, so that that doesn't always help us as much as we might want it to.

Andrew Burnett: 25:43

The mythical land of over there.

Joni Martinez 25:45

Exactly. I don't believe it exists, but, you know, so, you know, sometimes the best thing to do is say, like, is it north or south or east or west? Now, sometimes people don't know cardinal directions. That's fine. We need to figure out what they what they can't help or, you know, how they can help us. Sometimes it's left and right Now, of course, that can also be confusing, because sometimes my right is someone else's left. So, you know, at that point, maybe if they say it's to your right, my best advice is to point to your right. Give them a visual cue. So, I might point to my right and say, oh, this way. And if they agree and they say, yeah, that way, then I know that yes, they're talking about my right and not theirs.

Jeff Molzow 26:35

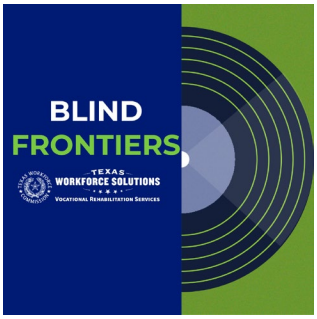
Now, if I want to maybe walk with somebody that might want to show me how to get there, they use a term sighted guide. Drew, talk to me about sighted guide and the best ways to do that with a traveler that I've never met before.

Andrew Burnett 26:48

Basically, what it happens is the person who is guiding the guide, can stick out there, touch the back of the hand of the person that they're going to be leading. And then that person, when they feel someone touch the back of their hand, they can then follow that hand up to right above the elbow there, and they can grab on to that person's elbow and kind of stand off to the side of them. There's different little nuances depending on if you're going, in a narrow area versus, the area where y'all can walk side by side, it's wide enough for two people to walk side by side, essentially. But that guy that walks out in front of the person being guided a little bit, so that they're, they they go through areas first and, you provide information for the person being guided, like, hey, we're about to I'm up to some stairs, we're going to be stepping up or we're going to be stepping down. And, basically, it's a way for, someone to get information about what they're traveling on, where they're going, and how to be guided to where they want to go.

Joni Martinez: 27:57

One thing I also like to advise students on is when you're, when you're getting, guide, you might want to use your cane as well. You know, don't just kind of hold your cane up. But maybe, you know, kind of have it clearing the side that the human the guide is not on. So, I'm holding onto my human guide with my left hand. It might be clearing sort of the right side of my body just to



make sure that, you know, if I'm in a grocery store. They don't accidentally, you know, cut the corner going around an aisle, and I don't hit that corner with my elbow or my shoulder and, you know, knock over that nice display.

Jeff Molzow: 28:37

Both of you are unashamedly blind. You are certified O & M instructors. Am I safe learning on them from you? How do you watch out for my safety if I'm traveling with you and learning how to do independent travel?

Andrew Burnett: 28:51

This is definitely a complicated question. It's one that I can say 100% without a doubt. I have you covered if you're my student. There's different techniques that that that we use and O & Ms receive extensive, training on how to monitor and do risk analysis of environments. And a lot of times, if one of my students, is going to make a mistake, I'd say like even 99% of the time, I've already gotten used to my student. I know what to be expecting. And, knowing is half the battle, you know, to borrow from GI Joe. I know where to put myself. Positioning wise, to help. Help? Keep my students safe. As a blind instructor, I make, make use of my cane not just for O & M purposes, but I also kind of use it as, as a student management tool.

There's there's definitely times where, you know, I kind of, you know, I if you see me out on the corner doing a lesson, it's always going to look like I'm using it almost as like a shepherd's crook, if you will. And kind of helping to guide my students along. And sometimes it's, guiding them away from, dangerous, location, like parallel traffic whenever it's going full bore, you know, 60 miles an hour, keeping them from getting too close to it. Other times, it's more keeping them from walking out into perpendicular traffic so that they don't start playing Frogger.

Jeff Molzow: 30:34

A very special thanks to our O & M instructors Drew Burnett and Johnny Martinez. This conversation will definitely continue. Thanks to producer Jessica Glazebrook for guiding us through this episode to our final destination. Executive producers for Blind Frontiers are Jessica Glazebrook and Jeff Molzow. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.

Closing outro: 30:59

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