



Blind Frontiers Podcast Episode 4 Transcript

Pick of the Litter

November 19, 2023

Jeff Molzow: 04:04

One of the choices a blind person may choose to make on their journey toward independence is whether or not to use a long white cane or to be partnered with a guide dog as an orientation and mobility aid. At first, this decision seems pretty easy. After all, who wouldn't want to wander the world with a beautiful, well-trained guide dog by their side? Guide dogs are allowed to go into stores and restaurants and transportation, and just about anywhere that people are allowed to go. And these rights are protected by federal and state law. However, this decision requires a lot of thought and responsibility. After all, your orientation and mobility skills must be at their peak. A guide dog is not an autopilot. The long white cane doesn't need to be fed or picked up after or taken care of by a veterinarian. It doesn't mind if you leave it in the corner and ignore it for a few days. In today's show, we're going to be talking with guide dog handlers and an orientation and mobility specialist. Our goal is to give you information if you're considering getting a guide dog. We want to help you to move forward in your blind frontiers.

Jessica Glasebrook Program Intro: 01:14

And 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: 01:38

Well, when I say thinking blind is going to the dogs, it really is. And today we're going to find out everything you ever wanted to know – and then some, about guide dogs. But I'm not doing it alone. Of course, I've got my incredible co-host, Joni.

Joni Martinez: 01:54

Hey, everybody.

Jeff Molzow: 01:55

And, Joni, have you ever thought of getting a guide dog?

Joni Martinez: 01:58

I have put some thought into it, yes. And I've decided not to.



Jeff Molzow: 02:05

But maybe we can convince you, because we have three wonderful guests in our studio today, and all of whom I would say are as close to experts on the subject of guide dogs as it can possibly be. Let's begin with Miss Kendal Lyssy. Kendal – Tell us a little bit about yourself and who you are.

Kendal Lyssy: 02:24

Thank you so much for having me on the podcast today. I'm so happy to be here. So, like Jeff said, my name is Kendal Lyssy. I am a graduate student at the University of North Texas up in Denton. Denton's about 40 minutes away from Dallas Fort Worth. I am a teaching assistant and I'm also a debate coach. And so those are two of my most prominent roles. I teach three sections of the Introduction to Communication course, and then I coach debate.

Jeff Molzow: 02:56

And so that's, so we can learn talking points from you here?

Kendal Lyssy 02:59

That's right. Had always happy to provide.

Joni Martinez: 03:03

We also have with us today Miss Claire Stanley who is also a guide dog user. So, Claire, tell us a little bit about yourself and kind of what you do and your journey with guide dogs.

Claire Stanley: 03:16

Sure. Hi, everybody. I'm Claire Stanley. I live just outside of Washington, DC. I currently work for the American Council of the Blind as the Advocacy and Outreach Specialist.

So, you name it. As far as advocacy goes, I do it, I work on Capitol Hill a lot. I do direct advocacy. But as a caveat, I'm actually about to start a new job in a couple of weeks that will continue on in the lobbying world. So fun, fun, new, exciting things to come. I am a guide dog user. I've been a guide dog user for over 12 years now. I'm on dog dog number three. So, you had a girl who was a golden retriever Labrador mix named Corolla. Then I had a black lab boy named Kodiak, and now I'm on dog number three, a yellow lab named Tulane. Yeah, so three, three great dogs. And I'm just such a proud and excited guide dog user.

Jeff Molzow 04:09

You sound like it. Now, what is your new job?



Claire Stanley: 04:12

My new job will be with the National Disability Rights Network, NDRN and I will be a public policy analyst. So basically, doing a lot of lobbying up on Capitol Hill.

Jeff Molzow: 04:22

And just to keep us inline, making sure we're all walking straight and, keeping our canes or our other four feet in the right direction, we have Miss Charlotte Simpson. Tell us about yourself. Charlotte.

Charlotte Simpson 04:34

Thank you for having me. I am an orientation and mobility specialist. I work for the Texas Workforce Commission. I am based in Austin, but I travel to 30 counties around Central Texas, and I teach adults how to get around with vision loss. So, I'm a dog lover, and I love preparing people to get a guide dog if that's what they want.

Jeff Molzow: 04:55

And that brings me to a first question. Tell me, how would you compare traveling with a guide dog versus traveling with a cane? And what are some of the key travel differences that you've noticed?

Charlotte Simpson: 05:06

So, if you think about canes and guide dogs both as tools for mobility, they both do the same three things, but they just do them in different ways. And so, they both offer information protection and identification. And so, the cane offers information by providing tactile feedback. You get different textures. You might get echolocation depending on the type of tip you're using. Canes offer protection by, you know, sweeping them low and wide in front of your body. They catch obstacles in your path, and you can go around it, or you can explore it depending on what your goal is. And then using a long white cane also identifies you as being blind, which has its pros and cons. Guide dogs give you information through body language, and so you get wagging tails you get head movements. They might slow down, but you get less tactile feedback. And so that's a big difference between the cane and the dog. The dog gives you protection by taking you around obstacles and objects. And the dog also identifies you as being a blind handler, which also has its pros and cons. It's more social, so you get more, social interaction when you have a dog by your side. But you get less tactile feedback. And so, it's, those are the two main differences. I would say.

Jeff Molzow: 06:31

When you look at somebody that says, hey, I want a guide dog. They say that they've made the decision to get a guide dog. What qualifications do you feel they need to have before they make that huge step from the cane to the guide?



Charlotte Simpson: 06:43

So, a guide dog is a live mobility tool. So, you've got, you know, a wiggly, squishy ball of fur that's going to propel you forward. It's going to take you around things, and then it's going to stop and wait for your command. And so, it's really important for you to both have the physical stamina to give the dog enough physical and mental stimulation, to remain healthy, both you and the dog. The dog is also going to when it stops and waits for your command, you have to know where you are and where you want to go. And so, you have to have really good, auditory awareness and, it's also really important, like your whole household is going to be involved. And so, you have to get all of the people in your household have to be willing to introduce your new furry family member into your house. So, all of those things are important.

Jeff Molzow: 07:41

What about on the street, Charlotte? So, if I'm, you know, the dog is not a robot. If I approach an intersection and hopefully, I'm going to use my good own am skills to analyze that intersection. At which point, what happens? What is my job at that point?

Charlotte Simpson: 07:58

You have to know, when to cross the street. You have to know how to be aligned to go straight across the street. And so, the dog is going to take you from curb to curb and take you around obstacles. But then you have to know how to command the dog to go forward at the correct time to cross the street.

And so, if you are, concerned about knowing that, that you don't know when to go, then that's where orientation and mobility training comes in. And it's that's where I would say let's do some training together and help you feel comfortable, so that you can be a good team member for your dog as well.

Jeff Molzow: 08:37

The dogs are not robots. We have got to be the brains behind the operation.

Charlotte Simpson: 08:40

That's right.

Claire Stanley: 08:42

I think that's such an important thing just to jump in, because I get asked all the time. Oh, your dog knows when to cross the street. That's awesome. And I always have to restrain from laughing and put on a serious face and say, no, let me explain. I've had orientation and mobility lessons throughout my life, but it's so true. People always have that misconception that your dog is a robot. It knows how to read streetlights and those kinds of things. So, it's definitely something people need to understand.



Joni Martinez: 09:09

Awesome! So, Claire, let's talk about you for a little bit. So, Tulane is your third dog. So, kind of tell us about your working life with Tulane and how everything is kind of worked out with the two of you?

Claire Stanley 09:24

Sure. So, Tulane and I have been together for – see if I can do the math – getting close to a year and a half. Not quite a year and a half now. And she is an awesome guide. She is very willing to work. She she's very energized and excited about performing a task. It's been a really great working relationship together so far. They told me when they – meaning the guide dog school – went to pair me, they really wanted to find a dog that could handle my lifestyle. And like I said, I live out of outside of Washington, D.C. I go into the city for at least pre-COVID, went into the city every day, took the metro, which is the subway. So very active lifestyle, lots of cars around us, people around us. So, I needed a dog that could handle that, you know, constant, you know, sensory overload and things like that. And she's the perfect dog for that. She can really handle that and isn't skittish about it or overwhelmed by it. She's almost like energized by it. She's like, yeah, let's do this. And so, it's been a really good matching for my lifestyle and that kind of thing. You know, she is a very energetic dog and a very excited dog. So, we've had to learn how to, like, steer that energy toward working and getting her focus. Because sometimes she can just be so excited. But yeah, it's been a great relationship so far and a great working relationship.

Joni Martinez: 10:46

How would you say that your life has changed as far as you know, going from being a cane user to having a dog guide in your life?

Claire Stanley: 10:54

So, I really enjoy working with a guide because it it's a different feel. It's a different way. Not that using a cane is a bad thing. You know, I used to cane for God probably 15 years of my life give or take. But working with a guide dog, as Charlotte was explaining before, you don't have that constant tactile feedback, but because of that, it's a different feel. To me, it almost feels smoother. My cane isn't constantly hitting things, and I have to figure out, okay, I've struck an obstacle in front of me, which way do I go? Instead, my dog just swoops, you know, swishes me around it. And, you know, I don't have to interact with those obstacles. So, I really, enjoy that smoother feel to what I'm trying to get around things. And then I love, love, love the memory of a dog. You know, we always joke, right, dogs are creatures of habit. So, once you know, you go somewhere so many times, your dog really gets to know your routine. And so, it makes the travel really, smooth as well, because your dog and you are working together, but your dog really remembers that, that route and so, again, it's not as choppy. Your dog kind of goes, okay, I know where we're going. Let's do this. So, when I go to the bus stop in the morning, she's like, I know we're going to the bus stop. Let's do this. And so, it's very smooth.



Jeff Molzow: 12:13

So, Kendall, when you made the decision to get a guide dog, what were some of the personal and professional decision points you went through in deciding, hey, I want to move from a cane to a guide dog.

Kendal Lyssy: 12:25

I've always loved dogs. My whole life I have always wanted a guide dog, and I actually. And going way, way back to the second grade, I met a blind woman by the name of Causeway Stone event who I'm not sure. I couldn't see where she worked because I can't remember right now, but, she had a guide dog named Pippa, and Pippa was a yellow lab and I and I struck up a mentorship, and I was so incredibly inspired by just the way that I was able to live her life with Pippa and really get around her environment in a really efficient manner, just really quickly. And so, when I decided to get a guide dog, some of the professional and personal reasons that led me to do so were so personally, I've always loved dogs and I just felt like it was time. I was 22 going on 23, and I thought, I want to do this before I go to graduate school. So now I have one year with the dog in undergrad, and I actually, I really, I mean, I thought about it a lot, and I watched the first documentary, Pick of the Litter, which is now on Netflix, because there are two of them. So today we're talking about two Disney Plus series, although there is also a movie called pick of the litter, directed by Dana Don, who are the same individuals who directed the Disney docu series. So, once I watched Pick of the Litter because although I knew, okay, I want to go to Guide Dogs for the blind. It's a two-week program. It's a great program. I've heard a lot of good information. I conducted some research and decided that it was just the right time in my life. Now, I do not expect the application process to be four months because normally the application process for a guide dog is about 6 to 9 months, if not even longer. And that's just because they really want to make sure that when I say the I mean the guide dog school, the guide dog school very wants to make sure that you get the appropriate amount of time to get matched with the dog.

Jeff Molzow: 14:36

And what was that application process like?

Kendal Lyssy: 14:39

I filled out the application in January, and then a week later I had a phone interview with Guide Dogs for the blind, and they asked me, do I my phone interview the admissions counselor asked me about my experiences with traveling and asked me some general questions about the route that I traveled every day they call me. A week later, I did the phone interview and then I went through. So, I went home for spring break. And so spring break is in March and my home visit, where a field representative from Guide Dogs for the blind comes out to your home environment in checks on your home environment and makes sure that you really do know how to travel around in a safe and effective manner. She came out the Friday after spring break, and then she reviewed my route for me. We talked about my lifestyle and then I did a vow to the recreation center from my dorm, which I lived in at the time, and I did very well on that route.



There was no hiccups. There were no points in time where I thought, oh, this isn't going well. So therefore, I would recommend it for the dog. After completing that about successfully. Finally in April of 2019. So, this is about three weeks after the home visit, which is I believe that that's pretty typical. So, within those three weeks, the guide dog school called me and said, we have selected a class date for you. You are approved to get a guide dog. And so, I indicated to them that I wanted the application process to go pretty fast. I just didn't know how fast it was truly going to go. So, within the span of four months, I was preparing to take care of a living, breathing animal, which would become my guide dog and my partner and my best for a friend.

Jeff Molzow: 16:40

When we come back, we'll go inside the guide dog training experience with Kendall and Claire, and we'll find out what it's like not only to be trained to work a guide dog, but to do it while being on TV. All that went Blind Frontiers continues to.

Program break 16:55

The Chris Cole Rehabilitation Center is an innovative residential teaching facility located in Austin, Texas that helps individuals who are blind or deaf blind 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. 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 ww.w dot Texas workforce.org.

Jeff Molow: 17:53

And there you were. You went to campus. What was what was training like for you that did those first couple of weeks?

Kendal Lyssy: 17:58

So, after the first couple weeks. So, I should start off by saying that about a week after the guide dog school informed me that I was going to be going to training, the class supervisor called me and asked me if I wanted to be on pick of the litter. And of course, I said yes, because honestly, who wouldn't want to be on the television channel, right? I mean, it is just the opportunity of a lifetime. So training was very, very fast paced. So, from the moment I got to the guide dog school, they would, rather the residential assistant, was tasked with taking my class and I on a tour around the building, and they were throwing cardinal directions at me pretty much left and right. And I really wasn't making sense of those, which at the time made that, you know, it just it was what it was. Now I really want to focus on the moment that I met Tartan who was my guide dog for three days and ya'll oh my goodness, it was. The world changed. So, I met her. So, my instructor knocked on my door and brought in a 45-pound calm. Sweet. Well, now calm down right in this 45-pound, hyperactive, rambunctious, but the sweetest little black lab I've ever laid



my eyes on. And oh, my goodness, I actually cried when it was so special and I was like, we're going to be best friends. We're going to go through graduate school together. We're going to go through life together. From the start, it was just very it was pretty fast paced. It was pretty intense. We started learning about the next day, and then around day three, my instructor in the class supervisor, noticed that I was experiencing some difficulties with orientation and mobility, and so day four comes around and it was the hardest day because that day basically. So, the supervisor told me, he said, you know, I want you to know that at this point, there's no guarantee that you're going to get to playing Tartan at home with you. And of course, I was completely devastated.

Jeff Molzow: 20:19

I mean, what a story. We've talked about Pick of the Litter, Claire. What? For people who have not had the joy of seeing that show. I'm addicted to it. I've been through it three times now. Mostly because I knew all the players on there. At least most of them. Tell people what pick of the litter is all about.

Claire Stanley: 20:38

Pick of the litter is all about will these dogs become guide dogs. AKA are they the pick of the litter? You like that? So, so like, Kendal had said earlier, pick of the litter first started in 2018, I believe, as a just a movie, you know, one episode movie. And they followed a litter of dogs, one specific litter, from GDB Guide Dogs for the Blind. And you got to see if they made it. I won't tell you what dogs do. No spoiler alerts. But it was extremely popular and extremely successful. And so, Disney reached out to, Dana and Dawn, the producers, who are phenomenal, by the way. They're great to work with and said, we want you guys to do this again. We want to make it into a docu series and so they reached out to GDB again and picked several dogs to follow as well. But this time they went a step further. So, in the first movie you only saw the dogs for the most part go toward making it to the school to start working with the, the trainers.

But in, pick of the litter, the docu series, you see them go all the way through, working with the puppy raisers to going back and working with the trainers at GDB and then going to the class and working with those of us, the handlers who are matched with the dogs and seeing if we, we graduated. So, unfortunately, spoiler alert, I did graduate with my dog.

But yeah, it was a really great experience, and I think it does a great job of showing literally the whole process from soup to nuts of seeing when these, you know, little puppies are working with puppy raising families, which just a great shout out to the puppy raising families. They do phenomenal work for us and it's all volunteer. So, doing that before they go back to school and then working with the professional trainers to do the guide training and then going to when we go in person to, to class to work with our dogs. All the way up to seeing if we graduate with our dogs and then sending us home.



Jeff Molzow: 22:44

I want to ask because I've been to several, trainings. I want to know it's stressful enough at the guide dog school and, you know, doing training, learning about your new partner, learning routes, trying to keep it all in your head, and all the while you know, people are watching you from the training staff. What was it like to be filmed?

Claire Stanley: 23:05

Oh, my goodness, I thought it was the most awkward, strange thing possible because yeah, this is my third dog, so I've done it two times before. And so, you know, I was familiar with how you know, I would be responsible for learning our route. And, you know, the instructor would start, you know, at the beginning, close behind me there. But then as we got further and further into the two weeks, you know, she would drop off further and further behind me and so on. So, it's familiar with what the process would be, but I never knew what it would be like to have a camera crew following me. So, it definitely made it, you know, that much more anxiety inducing because, you know, if you're with this new dog and you want to show your instructor, look, I have the commands, right? And I got my route down and I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, but oh, yeah, now there's a camera crew following me around as well. So definitely up the ante of, like, everybody's watching me.

Jeff Molzow: 23:58

So how about you? How about you, Kendall? What was it like for you?

Kendal Lyssy: 24:02

So having a camera crew follow me around, in addition to getting my first guide dog was probably one of the most stressful experiences. However, I would not change it for the world because I am a strong believer in everything happens the way it's supposed to. And I believe that I was supposed to be on pick up the litter when I was to show people who want to get guide dogs to hostile people who don't know very much about guide dogs, that sometimes doesn't work.

Claire Stanley: 24:36

A really fun, behind the scenes moment when Kendal and I were filming for our own, a segment, it was August in Texas, and so it was so hot outside that the camera equipment stopped working. It completely shut down. And so, we had to. Yeah. So, we had to go back inside to cool the camera equipment down so we could go back out and film again. So that just gives you an idea of what Kendal was also experiencing. You know, she's hot and trying to concentrate on traffic while, you know, while the camera equipment couldn't even function. So, we had a lot of fun in August in Texas filming.



Claire Stanley: 25:20

Okay, I have to share. I have to share my similar story to that, that as well. When they did my first interview in May, before I left to go to GDB, they, filmed me and my now retired guide dog Kodiak. And Kodiak was almost ten years old at the time or was ten years old. And he's a black Labrador, and it was the same thing. It was a human, humid, gross Washington, D.C.-day and they had us walk down the street in front of my apartment complex. But they didn't just have us do it once, because that's not how you film. You go back and forth and back and forth, and this poor black lab could tell he was like, mom, I guide your home. Why are we doing? And by the time we've done it three times, I think his tongue was like lolling out of his mouth and his head was down and he was like, why are. We doing this?

Charlotte Simpson: 26:07

So, all right, well representing orientation and mobility, obviously it's really important to have your own training prior as you prepare, to get a dog. So, if you need O&M training, feel free to contact me. There's a lot of resources out there, and if you don't know what they are, I am happy to give them to you. Either through the Texas Workforce Commission or, like Kendal said, GDB has an O&M immersion program. I know Leader Dog in Michigan also has an O&M program. So, if you need O&M, training, feel free to contact me, and I'll, get you connected.

Jeff Molzow: 26:43

And at this point, it's very important that we put forward that although we've been talking about Guide Dogs for the blind on today's episode, there are a number of excellent guide dog schools across the country. They may have differences in training duration and techniques, and one just might be the right fit for you. We will make an effort to put contact information for several of the schools into our show notes. This will give you the opportunity to make the right choice and ask questions. Call and talk to the admissions department. Take a moment to talk to a graduate. Find out what they think of the training experience they had at their particular school. Our thanks to our guests Claire Stanley, Kendal Lyssy and Charlotte Simpson. Thanks also to Otis Wilson, who produced this episode. Executive producers for Blind Frontiers are Jessica Glasebrook and Jeff Malzow. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.

Closing outro: 27:37

Thank you for listening to Blind Frontiers, a production of the Chris 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 Chris Cole Rehabilitation Center, please call our admissions department at (512) 377-0340.