



# Blind Frontiers Podcast Episode 5 Transcript

## Beauty and the Blind

December 10, 2023

### Jeff Molzow: 04:05

At risk of starting off this episode was a cliché. We've all heard the phrase dress for success. But let's stop and disassemble that phrase just for a moment. Let's start out with the term dress. This might include the color, the style of the clothing we're wearing. How we're choosing to wear it, and in what circumstance it might include our hair, or our makeup, or our grooming in general. What scent we choose to wear. Success. In this situation, success is that first impression when we meet somebody for the first time. Whether it be a significant other, a new friend, a new employer – we all want to look great so that we can present ourselves well in our very visual society. But further, it's a feeling that we feel about ourselves. When we are dressed well, we walk in and know that we're making a great presentation. We feel successful and that success translates itself so quickly into self-confidence. Will Rogers once said, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." And in this modern-day society, you never know when you're going to make that first impression. Of course, we make a first impression when we meet somebody for the first time. But what about when we get on our virtual conferences, like in teams and in zoom? We're making an impression then, too. And we want to look our best. We want to move forward with confidence and success as we stride into our blind frontiers.

### Jessica Glasebrook Program Intro: 01:38

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: 02:02

Thank you so much, Jessica, and hello and welcome. I am indeed your host, Jeff Molzow, and glad to welcome you to this episode of Blind Frontiers. We're glad you chose to spend this time with us, but today's story is not mine to share. Here's producer Jessica Glasebrook.

### Jessica Glasebrook: 02:18

Today, we're sitting down for an interview with one of the most essential members of the Chris Cole Rehabilitation Center staff. Oftentimes when people first experience blindness, they have a very definite idea of how blindness should look. And that idea isn't always positive. It's often rooted in depictions of helplessness that we see in popular culture and media. If we're honest with ourselves, we learn more about blindness from the outside world than we do about experiencing people who are actually blind.



This is where Miss Valerie Alvarez comes in. Valerie is our blindness training coordinator who works tirelessly to educate Criss Cole staff and the community about empowered and independent lives of people who are blind. Through training, alternative techniques, and hands on experience, Valerie creates curricula which allow people to experience blindness from this perspective of self-reliance and self-determination. Today, I'm sitting down with Val to talk about her most revolutionary curriculum – My Reflection Matters. My Reflection Matters focuses on blindness from the area of choice. Choice about how one presents in society. Choice about clothing, makeup, hair, grooming, hygiene and soft skills. Choice about how the world sees us. We may not be able to control being blind, but we can control the stories we tell about blindness. Val is here to help us rewrite and edit our stories. This interview has been edited for length and clarity, but I truly hope that you will enjoy and learn from Val's insights into blindness, reflections, appearance, and why it all matters. So, I'm here with Valerie Alvarez, and she is our blindness training coordinator here at Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center. And Valerie, would you mind telling me a little bit about what a blindness training coordinator does?

### Valerie Alvarez: 04:40

Sure. Hi, everyone. The blindness training coordinator is responsible for providing training for our staff at Criss Rehabilitation Center. Our staff in the field who carry or touch BVI caseloads and to our providers and other stakeholders that are interested in blindness awareness training. Specifically in-house staff and field staff come through me to attend immersion training, which is a non-visual training for our staff. And the other kinds of things, are, training in blindness skills or what we call BST training. So, we make sure that our staff at CCRC maintain their, skills and blindness training. And so, we put together some trainings, once a year and, several times during the year specifically for our in-house staff. And I'm also responsible for, for providing support for our program specialists, who are responsible for training vocational rehab teachers in the field. So, we're very closely with the program specialists who, trained for vocational teachers and O&M, specialists and some people who, we do, blend the skills training. So that's it in a nutshell.

### Jessica Glasebrook 06:16

Why is it so important for all staff, including sighted staff, to have blind the skills training? It makes sense for blind staff to be able to teach blind student, but why is it so important for sighted staff to have blindness skills training?

### Valerie Alvarez: 06:29

I think it does two things. I think one – it allows the teacher who can see to understand fully, the amount of time, patience, frustration and all those emotions that a person that their customer who's blind is experiencing while learning these skills. The other thing that it does is gives them an opportunity to improve their pedagogy, meaning is it is it that – How am I explaining or presenting the content? You can't sell a product blindness not to people. You can't sell a product you don't know anything about. That being said is that if you don't have any ideas, what it means to, try to figure out, Braille, for example, or what it means to, learn how to do cane travel or organizational skills. If you don't have any idea what that feels like or what that looks like for a



person who's blind. How do you know how to teach it? Well, the best way to learn that is to put yourself under blindfolds and to do it. The other thing I hope is that we are, full masters of our specific training area but we have a baseline knowledge of all that that is blindness skills, because that's the way that our customers are, you know, ultimately be more successful if we can all contribute and teach holistically versus just being specialized teacher in one training, blindness skills area.

### Jessica Glasebrook: 08:18

So, one of the things that I promised the listeners that I would ask about, is your My Reflection Matters curriculum.

### Valerie Alvarez: 08:28

Yes. So that's the other flip side to, what I get to do is, not only do I get to help with our, group skills training in the summer for our youth for our Pre-ETS students, but I wrote a few years ago, when I was started off writing this curriculum, when I was, teaching, at a different, in a different place at Texas school For the Blind. And it's called my Reflection Matters. My Reflection Matters is a curriculum that I developed to teach both men and women that if you look good, you feel good. If you feel good, you can look good. And that, the idea of blending in without sight is not a thing that should be viewed as negative, but more what it is that whatever you want to look like, that you look, the way that you want to look, because you can look that way, meaning you have the skills to have your look or your image. You can design it the way you want and there's skill behind that. So, I always kind of tease the, the men and women, you know, we're working on two things employable and dateable if you want proof that applies to you. So, so my reflection matters. It's not about beauty or it's not about how you look, and it's not about the products that you're doing on your face. Those are all personal, decisions that we all make.

But really, what it is that I'll use the makeup as an example. It's just saying if I need to put makeup on, I can if I want to put makeup on, I can. It's just another tool in the toolbox so that, you know, women, young women have the opportunity to, you know, have a skill that they can, share maybe with a child if they have one.

Grandchild, if they have one niece or nephew who whomever, you know, this is this is an opportunity for us to put your put your makeup on because you want to and you know how, but that's the that's the hard part, right? The know-how and, that's why I teach, the young people, young women, all women, I guess, you know, to young, how to put makeup on non-visually.

And so, it's just very small subtle techniques on how to do that, but in terms of what colors they want to wear. Right. That's, that's up to them. But I do tell them you gotta have a day look and you gotta have a night look. So, it's a lot of fun. We have the My Reflection Matters for the men's class, is slightly different. It's obviously taught by a man. I've had the opportunity to work with Drew Burnett – Andrew Burnett in, orientation, mobility specialists. And we worked together, and he allowed me to help him learn the curriculum, and he's kind of been making it his own. And I really appreciate that about him. So, in that class, the men are shaving, learning how to put ties on, talking about, sort of this idea, you know, just a fashion piece, right? Like a



professional, like you don't want to sit down and show your white socks with your black shoes. Do I wear black shoes? Do I wear brown shoes? You know, things like that? There's some hair stuff in that class. Just, kind of those things that you think, maybe men don't care about, but in reality, they really, really do. We talk about, you know, they, they even talk about, like, Cologne and, you know, kind of body odor, but not spraying so much that you smell like you brought the Dillard's counter with you, you know, those kinds of things. And then in the meantime, the women, like I said, we're doing some makeup, hair, things like that. Then we all come together. The men and women who are participating in class all come together, and we talk about those, social kind of social norms that sometimes as people who are blind, we forget about because we get comfortable, like not making, face contact, things like that. You know, we talk about, techniques and navigating a buffet kind of kind of thing. So, all of these skills that lead to employability lead to self-confidence. They lead to, self, promotion, if you will. And they lead to professional relationships, friendships, maybe romantic relationships if they want. But it's just that, that class where, it's, it's intimate in the sense of talking through issues while using these techniques as the vessel to help people realize that their reflection matters just like they do.

### Jessica Glasebrook: 13:56

What I'd. Love to know is if you if there is something that you wish people who are blind who took your My Reflection Matters curriculum. If there was one thing you wish they knew, what would that be? One takeaway that you hope for them to take away after your class.

### Valerie Alvarez: 14:18

I think that people are always looking for this thing called independence, and there's nothing more independent than making yourself feel good. And some of these techniques. And through this, through these things, you can independently make yourself feel good. Oh, I think I think we're always chasing the independence. We're always chasing this word of independence.

I mean, when I tell people, when I, when I speak to people, they always, we always talk about, well, I want to give them a blind person skill to make them as independent as possible. Yeah. That everybody does. Right. But I want my students in my class to walk away with, make them feel independent, because a lot of people define independence by a thing or a place the person is, is it should be or what they should be doing vocationally. For me, I want them to feel independent. I think these things can help people.

Jeff Molzow: 00;15;32;06 - 00;15;56;21

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. 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 dot Texas workforce.org](http://WWW.Texasworkforce.org). You're listening to Blind Frontiers, and we continue now their conversation between Jessica Glasebrook and Blindness Training coordinator Valerie Alvarez all about appearance, success and confidence.

## Jessica Glasebrook: 16:40

What is independent feel like? If you were to describe it to someone else?

## Valerie Alvarez: 16:44

It feels like if I want to be in pajamas, I can, if I want to have a power suit match the hair, matched the shoes matched the face. With that I can. If I want to be in my hangout, I can. I can make myself fit the moment. To me, independence feels like that. Like, I don't I don't need anyone to do that. Now, how many get how am I going to get there? How am I going? Over time, I need all of those things and that's that. There's a skill set involved, as you know, that that comes with that. And sometimes it doesn't feel as independent because you may not have the skill set that it was going to take to do that completely on your own. That's okay, because I think that, independent feels like I, I did this on my own. You know, I have a system and, you know, I can do cute. I can do super cute hairstyle. I can be funny. You can. You know there's nobody that needs to be involved in that.

## Jessica Glasebrook 17:55

So, in speaking specifically because you know that even though our listeners are across genders, you know, both of us are women. What is something that comes up for you with women who are blind. You know, one of those things, it comes up over and over and over again that you wish you could just hand out a Frequently Asked Questions card.

## Valerie Alvarez 18:15

I think that what frequently comes up in the beginning of the class.

For women, but I think for, for both men and women, I used to be able to do this thing. And I can't do it anymore. I used to be able to do my eyeliner. I used to be able to do... and you can still just, maybe you're just going to do it a little bit differently.

But when they all leaves are like yeah, yeah, I got it right. Whether it's the shaving stencil like oh man I used to be able to maintain my goatee. Now I have to go to the barber, or I have to ask my brother to do whatever the case may be. You know, now the stencil is like, oh yeah, I still can win.

But this thing is, helping me. I used to be able to put my mascara on, and then I show the technique, you know, like, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I got it, I got it. Yeah. So, I don't know if it's a question anybody has, but everybody walks in with this idea, a list of things they used to be, oh you want to do they want to know if they can still do it.



## Jessica Glasebrook: 19:30

So that kind of segways into my next question, and it might be the same answer. If you could pick one misconception about blind people and their physical appearance to shatter, what do you think it would be?

## Valerie Alvarez: 19:40

I think that I want to shatter the fact that we don't have people who come do our hair, makeup or come shave us or they don't come outfit us. It's a myth. Yeah. We don't have a personal stylist. So, it is a skill that, be it adventitiously blind or congenitally blind, we have to acquire. But, once we acquire it, we're good.

## Jessica Glasebrook: 20:06

Because this, this blends so seamlessly into employment, how do you think having the techniques to care for one's appearance and to curate your appearance the way you want it. How do you think that impacts your chances of becoming employed.

## Valerie Alvarez: 20:26

You know, I'll tell you this story. This story's a true story. So, I had a group of hiring managers, and they were, here for training. There were eight of them, and we were sitting in a room, and we were, bouncing, kicking this ball around this idea of, sort of my reflection and the image, right. And the hiring managers told me a story and she said, 'you know what we're talking about, right.' She said to the room. She said, 'like just the other day there was a young lady came into my room, went to my office, we had this – she was so great – she you know, we each came in and chatted, but it was July, and she was wearing snow boots. And she said, honestly, I couldn't figure out why she was wearing these snow boots.'

## Jessica Glasebrook: 21:24

How does this translate into the social sphere?

## Valerie Alvarez: 21:28

I think what it does is that it – I think it's so funny. Sometimes we're so afraid of acknowledging that friendships are developed by our sighted peers or our sighted society based on attraction. And that doesn't have anything to do with like, romantic, right? That's not like, oh yeah, those people are looking like, are you? We're all wearing the same kind of garb, right. And so, I think that we want to live the life like – what does it matter even what everybody looks like? Well, really, does it matter? Does it matter? But you know what, guys, for whatever reason, it does matter, right? So, if it does matter. Then, I guess we all got to get in the matter if does matter,





right. And so, in terms of dating like there's that. What makes you feel attractive. You know like people will find these other things, your mind and your heart and your soul attractive. But from the outside, right. That's how humans are attracted to each other. And so, I think that it's just kind of helps build bridge that gap between our community and the sighted community. It's just I know it seems so superficial, doesn't it?

### Jessica Glasebrook: 22:59

We're all sensory creatures. We are. We are sensory beings.

### Valerie Alvarez: 23:03

And that doesn't stop when you lose your vision. You just might need to take a little pause, and you know, make it an organized. How am I getting, you know I the men's class and the women's class. We, we start with the same thing. The organization of the stuff.

Well, it's the same thing I think for sighted people. But I think it really does bridge that gap. It can, not always, you know, like, I mean we're full of, nuances and coincidences and whatever. But I'm telling you, if you reflection matters so much that you can decide who you want to be, what kind of rom com you want to be.

### Jessica Glasebrook: 24:00

And I think in all of the social spheres. I hear so often, 'How do I get to know people again?' You know, 'how do I engage my interests again?' Let's turn the conversation a little bit to talk about – you mentioned some things that are trending. What is trending that you would want our listeners to know about?

### Valerie Alvarez: 24:21

You know what. I feel like I feel like one thing that is trending is this...it used to be that you had to wear, like, if you were committed to wearing gold jewelry, that was kind of jewelry you wore. Now, I think what's trending is not everything has to match all the time, you know?

And so that's kind of nice. I think that the world of work is changing as the world of remote comes into play, right. So, it may be that, not everybody, certainly not everybody has to wear heels, you know, hosiery and all that. Gosh, you know, when you started wearing high heels without hose, it's game changer, right? But I do think so, in my opinion, it's about, when you turn that camera on, it's that subtle, made up face. You know, even if you're a neutral on neutral, a pretty lip, good shaving because that's what people are focusing on. And when you're in that little window, does it really matter too much what you're wearing? But it does matter. That face contact, that camera content her, that the lighting and those things like that. So, I think that the most, the prettier, I guess, or the most confident that you can make your face. I think you can feel confident about being in the window.



## Jessica Glasebrook: 26:04

So, I did want to address because you had talked about with the virtualing and as we expand out to remote work, and things like that I have definitely seen that as a sort of a, some people say, 'oh, well, then I don't have to care about my appearance ever again because I'm remote.' So how how do you think is is a way to strike a balance between sort of that, that relaxed? I'm remote. And for heaven's sakes, no one wants to see sweatpants.

## Valerie Alvarez: 26:42

Well, I think I see, these videos or these, things that have gone viral or whatever, have debunked that idea. If anything is wrong, you're getting caught. Like 100%. And we have seen so many funny things of what people have done on their cameras so that there's that first and foremost. Like, like let's just, you know, that that this idea that no one's going to see, you know, who cares? No. Somehow it has happened, and we've had these moments of like, 'Oh my God, my camera was on?' You know, so that has debunked itself in my opinion. But here's the other thing. What happens when you spend eight hours, be it whether you're remoting one day or two days. When you leave your home, it's the want to leave it. It makes you want to go out and be around people. I've heard people say that, especially when we got out of the pandemic. But even now, people, I have, very close friends who only work one day a week in person. And they like, man, I feel like so good when I have to, like, get shoes on. You know, so, I think that while we don't feel the need to do it all day, every day. But what it does, it compels us or pushes us out the door.

## Jessica Glasebrook: 28:08

Is there a particular soft skill or, appearance trait or something that you would like to see our community change? And I'm saying our community as people who are blind. Is there a soft skill or an appearance foible, that you would like to see us change as a culture?

## Valerie Alvarez: 28:32

I think that I really want us to, I want us to get in a place where we acknowledge that it matters. That, it does matter as as a person who's blind as well. Sometimes I think as a community we don't think it matters because we're not receiving the same visual information, right. Sometimes I feel a little controversial, right. Because I think when I'm saying, it does matter, I think people are saying, no, Valerie doesn't. Because I can just be who I am. You can be who you are. But, in the moments of when you're trying to seek employment and you want to obtain and maintain employment, or do you want your, wanting to seek, whatever type of relationship there is a certain amount of acknowledgment that you have to – you got to do a little bit to fit into the people who see you. I think that I think we sometimes, we want to acknowledge that. And I just want people to know that I am here to help in any way that I can. Because I care about, my people. I care about the community, and I care about, us coming together, so that we can, educate the world around us about blindness and how able and capable blind people are. And I want to help be a solution. So, please, you know, people who are interested in things I talked





about today and people are interested in blindness awareness when they're interested in, My Reflection Matters or anything that I can help with in getting people to a place of belief in blindness. I am 100% open and willing to help.

## Jessica Glasebrook: 30:48

The poet Rumi is reported to have said yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I'm wise, so I'm changing myself. The training that Valerie and her team have put together invites those of us in the blind community to do both. By embodying a story about blindness that focuses on choice, relationship building, and positive self-concept, we begin to create a culture of possibility for everyone. We hope you've enjoyed this episode of Blind Frontiers. If you have questions about how your community could benefit from blindness training, send Valerie an email at [valerie.alvarez@twc.texas.gov](mailto:valerie.alvarez@twc.texas.gov). You can also follow us on social media to learn how our students are rewriting their blindness stories.

## Jeff Molzow 31:39

Executive producers for Blind Frontiers are Jessica Glasebrook and Jeff Molzow. Thanks for listening and we'll talk to you soon.

## Program Outro 31:51

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