Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I am Theresa Stern, and I'm your host. Welcome everyone to Central Bark. Today, I have to say is going to be a super fun day, because today joining me is Sherry Owen. She is one of our fabulous Guide Dogs for the Blind graduates with her guide dog, Martinez. Welcome, Sherry.

Sherry Owen: Thank you, Theresa. I'm super excited to be here.

Theresa Stern: Well, we are so excited to have you. Sherry has many, many, many amazing talents, and one of them is really community building, and that's what we're going to dig into a little bit today. Sherry, let's start. Why don't you tell us a little bit about how you became involved with our Guide Dogs for the Blind community?

Sherry Owen: Oh, my gosh. Well, I'm a veteran, United States Air Force veteran, and I was at the Blind Center.

Theresa Stern: First and the foremost, thank you for your service.

Sherry Owen: Sure, you're welcome. I was using this cane, and my orientation and mobility specialist person said to me, "If you go to the Blind Rehab Center, it'll be so much quicker. Guess what? You could even get a guide dog." I go, "What? A guide ... " I said, "What?" I'm like, "Okay, I'm going." I really went to the Blind Rehab Center in Long Beach, specifically to finish the orientation and mobility training so that I could get a dog, a guide dog. I researched all the schools, and Guide Dogs for the Blind was the one I wanted. I applied, oh my gosh, I got accepted. I was like, "Ah, what's happening now?" I came to San Rafael to this beautiful, beautiful organization.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Yeah, so you went through your blind rehabilitation, got your orientation mobility skills down pat, and then applied to get a guide dog. Tell us a little bit about what it was like for you coming in to get a guide dog and what it was like the first time you met Martinez.

Sherry Owen: Oh, my gosh, it was crazy. My wife, Jenny, was really funny because I'm like, "Oh, I just got accepted!" I was so excited. Shortly thereafter, I got a phone call and, "Do you want to come to campus?" I was like, "Well, I mean, yes! Okay." Jenny was like, "Oh my gosh, this is amazing." My wife, of course, we're Jewish and her biggest concern was making sure I was fed. She was like, "Well, are you going to eat? When are you going to eat lunch?" I'm like, "I don't know. They say they're going to have a lunch for me when I get off the plane." "Well, what is it?" I'm like, "I don't know what it is. I don't think there's a chef's menu yet. I get that when I get to campus from what I understand."I got in the van, I got to campus. The resident assistant was fantastic, the staff was great. They oriented me to my room. The food was amazing.

Then the next day, they work with you with the harness to make sure that you have knowledge of the harness. Oh my gosh, the next day is when I got Martinez. I know he was going to be a big boy because the other students in class were like, "Hey, what's your crate feel like?" I'm like, "The crate?" "Is it a big crate, a small crate?" I'm like, "I don't know," because Martinez is my first guide. I was like, "I don't know. I think it's pretty big." I'm like, "Okay." Martinez was just incredible, incredible. I was sitting there and he comes in and you hear his pitter patter of his feet and wagging his tail. He just came up and gave me all these kisses. It was just right. It was just perfect.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness. He's a great big yellow lab, isn't he?

Sherry Owen: He is. He goes between 68.5 and 70 pounds. I wanted that. I have multiple sclerosis and I used to be a power-lifter and strong woman, so I knew I could handle a bigger guide, a bigger dog. That's what I asked for. Boy was Guide Dogs for the Blind fantastic in matching me with just the perfect dog. It was incredible.

Theresa Stern: Or were they matching Martinez with the perfect person? That's the real question.

Sherry Owen: Oh, my gosh. No. Martinez makes me a way better person. Let me tell you, it's like they told me at the rehab center. I hate seeing Rehab Center because it's like, I mean, I can't really be rehabbed for being blind, but anyway.

Theresa Stern: Right. no, I know.

Sherry Owen: It's one of these things where what's so interesting in the community is that Martinez, everybody would say to me, okay, you're going to get a lot of attention because you have a dog, a lot of attention. You have a dog. You know what? I actually don't get up a lot of attention because they just like Martinez. It actually takes it off of me. They have this all wrong. They don't care about me at all. This is fantastic. Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Oh, that is so funny. But it is true, isn't it? Tell me, you mentioned a little bit about your background. So I know you were in the Air Force, and then you said you did some power lifting. You were an athlete, right? Or you still are actually. I know you hit the gym a lot. Tell us a little bit about your background. It's really interesting.

Sherry Owen: I was in the Air Force. I was stationed at Edwards Air Force Base. I worked with the space shuttle response team, which was sort of cool. It's in the middle of the desert in Mojave, and you're like, okay, does this land like a plane? Does it land straight down like it does when it goes up. You learn a bunch of stuff. Then I really got into power lifting and competing, and strong woman and body building, and a lot of different feats of strength, kind of like competitions, which is just really, really, really cool. I love the gym, and it was just a great place to be in. Then I coached quite a few athletes, and still to this day, it's what I really love doing is just being a life coach, being a mentor, especially since Jenny is a professor here at UCSB, just on campus.

It's a way to work with these athletes. I think one of the most amazing things that Martinez does that is just because he's Martinez, is that when we walk into the gym and it's, "Oh Martinez!" He's in harness, so he ignores them and we sit down. It's one of these things where you have these athletes and everybody has a bad day or a good day, but if these young adults, these young athletes can see somebody who was an athlete, who still is an athlete who's blind with a guide dog coming to practice, being independent there at practice, being joyful, being supportive, they're like, it's such an inspiration to these young athletes.

Theresa Stern: You are especially working with the UCSB ladies basketball team, correct?

Sherry Owen: Martinez and I do a lot with the women's basketball team as far as mentoring the athletes. We also do this breakfast that Jenny and I really love. It's called the Scholar Athlete Breakfast, and we do it twice a year.

Theresa Stern: Oh, tell me more about that. Yeah.

Sherry Owen: Yeah. It's for all the athletes at UCSB, not just basketball. If you get 3.4 or above in that quarter, then you get invited to this breakfast that Jenny and I sponsor, and it's by RSVP only. You don't just get to come and grab food once you're done with training if you didn't make the grade. It's a way to support the scholarship. That's why it's called a student athlete. What I found really funny is last breakfast, they were talking, they go, "Sherry, they're messing with you." I said, "Who's messing with me?" They said, "Well, they say if they don't make the breakfast, they say just don't talk. When you're around her, she can't see you, so don't say anything because if she knows you didn't make it, you're in trouble." Now I know what they're doing, Theresa, now I know their game.

Theresa Stern: You're onto them, Sherry.

Sherry Owen: I'm onto them. Now if they don't make it, we just go hunt them down.

Theresa Stern: There you go.

Sherry Owen: So it's good. Yeah.

Theresa Stern: I love it. It seems like you and Martinez together are quite a team in terms of your mentoring and coaching. That's one of the things that I find interesting about having a guide dog is that I feel like my guide dog has helped me a ton getting around safely, but they help so many other people. Can you talk a little bit about that, how having Martinez has really helped you touch other lives?

Sherry Owen: Well, now you're going to Teresa, I don't like to get teary. Geez, now I'm getting emotional. It's one of these things where for me and for you that it's a team and you're not alone, and he's just not a guide. He's your best friend in that capacity. I trust him a hundred percent implicitly, where it's like, okay, you're going to take me where I need to be, and I'm going to trust you with this, and you're going to protect me. He's given me and provided me the opportunity to go and be a force in the community where I wasn't think I had that confidence before I had Martinez. I know I didn't. I was really not confident with a cane, not because I couldn't use it, but just because your soundscape changes when you're blind.

Everybody always talks about a landscape, and how I like to explain it is, but we have soundscapes. We hear things that are normal in our community that we rely upon to feel safe. With Martinez, he does that for me. What he does is he allows me then to just have an impact on everybody around me. Even when we go through Albertsons to get to the gym, per se, it's like the Checkers at Albertsons will literally leave people standing there wanting to pay for groceries and come over and go, "Hi, Martinez." I'm like, "Okay." But he has such profound impact on everywhere we go, and he has the ability to touch so many lives just by people watching him with me. That's the kind of an impact that he has. It's like people see him and I'm secondary, but they see him saying not, "Oh, she's helping that dog." It's, "Oh, that dog is helping her."

Theresa Stern: Right. The relationship, I think, is so powerful. I think in a world where things are become sort of transactional that that relationship is really symbolic for people. You and Martinez really highlight that with the work that you do. I know you're part of our alumni association board of directors, and I appreciate that. You're always looking for a way to give back, and I think that's really an important sort of role model and inspiration for others as well.

Sherry Owen: Theresa, it's like you're making me emotional again, but I've always been a giving person. What I find with Martinez and also Guide Dogs for the Blind, and especially with Martinez, is it's just unconditional. Right? There's no conditions. Yes. Does he come and nudge me at 2:47 and say, "Hey, it's almost three. I want my food."

Theresa Stern: Yes, they do.

Sherry Owen: Yeah, okay. There are limits here. Right? Don't we love that, Teresa? Don't we be love like, "Hey, where's my nudge?" Because you know what? We rely on that. I love that.

Theresa Stern: Well, you get so much when you give. Right?

Sherry Owen: Yes. Yeah. Yes. It's like, I love the nudge, and I love he does this thing with his paws where it's like, "Thump, thump." I'm like, "Yeah, I know you're there." It's like, "I hear you, buddy. I hear you. Give me five more minutes." He's like, "Okay, I'm ready for you to take off this harness so I can go play with the girls."

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Sherry Owen: Right?

Theresa Stern: Totally. Oh my gosh. Well, I have to tell a little story about Sherry. Not only does Sherry have a guide dog, she also has her own personal guide crow. Can you tell everybody about your little Crow friend? Because it just cracks me up.

Sherry Owen: Oh my gosh. Are you seriously bringing up the Ethel?

Theresa Stern: Ethel. Yes.

Sherry Owen: Okay, I'll tell the story. All right. During the pandemic, everything was closed and nothing was happening. Martinez and I, to relieve him, I go out the house and there's this little tiny hill where you go up and down, and then there's this green area with trees and whatnot. This one time I was out and I heard this cawing, and I'm like, "Huh?" I go, "That's interesting." I had mistakenly dropped a few pieces of Martinez's kibble. Well, he didn't pick it up because he's been trained not to, but I'm like, oh, that bird. That bird just ate his kibble. I go, "That's crazy." I come back in, I go back out the next day, same cackle, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, okay, I'll give you a kibble." Because it wouldn't be quiet until I give it a kibble.

I named this bird Ethel. It reminds me of Jenny's grandmother, where it's so nosy and always there and in my business. I'm like, "Okay, Ethel. All right, I'll give you your kibble." This other time, and this went on forever, I even told friends about it. I'm like, "Oh my God, I got this bird. It follows me." They said, "Oh, look, you have a guide bird. You got a guide dog. You got to guide bird." They're like, "It's amazing."

Theresa Stern: Yeah. I love this idea that you're mentoring and coaching. Tell me a little bit about some of the things that come up for your athletes and ways that you can kind of help direct them.

Sherry Owen: Well, I think that so often there's issues that come up relating to wins or losses. I think there's issues that come up related to just being a student, just an athlete. There's issues that come up just about life in general. Sometimes huge things, sometimes minor things. When I talk to them, I'm very mindful of where they're at at this moment in time. I try to help them understand that life is always changing. That this moment is this moment and 10 minutes ago is gone. You can only really look to the future. Sometimes they can't see a future. Sometimes they're so stuck in, I mean, ironically, the here and now. But in this negative spin, if I can get just one of them to get out of that negative spin and let them understand how powerful they are and that they can dance with the universe, and that I love that the entire world is sort of open to them and just allow them to feel the energy that's around them, and they can come out the other end of that and get it.

It doesn't mean how I would get it. It means how they would get it. Where they're like, okay, okay, okay. See? Okay, all right, we got you. Then they leave and you can just see, well, I can't see it, but the thing of it is they leave and you can hear it in their voice how they have hope. My job, as I see it, as a life coach, is to provide hope, is to give them hope. If they have hope, they have everything.

Theresa Stern: Oh, I love that. I love that. Oh my gosh. Sherry, I want to thank you so much for dropping by Central Bark today, and I would like to encourage everyone to, as you said, dance with the universe. I love that saying. Thank you. Thank you for inspiring us, and hopefully we'll see you around soon.

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