Theresa Stern:

Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Theresa Stern and I'm your host.

Well, hello everyone and welcome to Central Bark. We are so excited today because we are doing our third Guide Dogs for the Blind update. Can you believe it? We've been doing Central Bark for two years. We're starting our third year. So of course our guest is Christine Benninger, who is our CEO and President at Guide Dogs for the Blind. She's going to tell us about some of the highlights of 2023 and what she's looking forward to in 2024. Welcome, Chris.

Christine Benninger:

Thank you so much, Teresa. I'm so excited to be here and I can't believe this is my third update. Oh my God.

Theresa Stern:

I know. It's crazy.

Christine Benninger:

The time flies. The time flies.

Theresa Stern:

It sure, sure does. Oh my gosh. So speaking of that, 2023 was a great year for Guide Dogs for the Blind, I'm sure. Tell us what your most proud of, what milestones or accomplishments are you most proud of for your team?

Christine Benninger:

So 2023 was truly an exciting year because we started seeing Guide Dogs for the Blind coming back from the pandemic and there's no bones about it, it was tough during the pandemic.

Theresa Stern:

Oh, yes.

Christine Benninger:

And when you think about it, we're an organization that it takes two years for us to kind of grow a guide dog, grow a guide dog team. When we had to do pauses during the pandemic, it means it's two years before we can sort of come back to where we were before.

Theresa Stern:

It's a long wagging tail.

Christine Benninger:

It's a long wagging tail, yes. And 2023 was that year. So we started exciting things like back to graduations again, on campus graduations, on campus tours, our volunteers are back on our campuses. We trained over 200 new guide dog teams, canine buddy teams and orientation, mobility immersion clients. That was really exciting. Youth programs served over 370 kids, over 700 puppies were placed with puppy raisers.

Theresa Stern:

Oh my goodness.

Christine Benninger:

So we came back with a roar. It was really exciting to see. I think for all of us, the vibrancy is back on our campuses and our services are coming back.

Theresa Stern:

Yeah, I was on campus last week or so and it was just so great to see. It does feel like pre-pandemic, lots of people around, lots of stuff going on, dogs everywhere. Just the energy is great. So congratulations on coming back.

Christine Benninger:

Thank you. Thank you. The energy is great. Absolutely.

Theresa Stern:

I think along with the pandemic, it gave us some time to really sort of think about who we are as Guide Dogs for the Blind and who we want to be. I think one of the areas that I just am so excited about, I hope you'll tell us a little bit more about is serving more clients, but also serving them more broadly. Can you talk a little bit about that and how you sort of came up with this concept and how it sort of plays out at Guide Dogs for the Blind?

Christine Benninger:

I want to give you a little bit of credit, Theresa, because that whole concept is part of your vision of what you helped institute at Guide Dogs for the Blind. So you need a little bit of a pat on the back for that too.

Theresa Stern:

Oh, well, thank you. But it's definitely a team effort.

Christine Benninger:

It's a team effort, but it takes somebody to champion. But yes, we really want to have a lifelong relationship with our clients no matter where you plug into our system. And recognizing that we are all whole people, we have a spectrum of needs, we have a spectrum of things that we all give back to our community, and that if we are going to be supporting our clients over a lifetime, that we need to be thinking about supporting our clients in different ways depending upon where they are in their life. During actually 2023, we started expanding our services and really looking at what are all the things that an individual needs in order to be a successful guide dog team. So let's start with one of the most important things, hearing. I know from my standpoint, probably I'm turning the television volume up a lot louder.

Theresa Stern:

Yes. That might be happening in my household as well.

Christine Benninger:

I used to, and most of us don't really recognize when we're starting to lose a bit of our hearing. And hearing is so critically important to being able to be successful both as a guide dog user and actually as a cane user as well. So including audiology in our services, including technology support, including things like physical support, making certain that we're walking upright, that we're not pulling too much to the left or to the right, so putting extra stresses and strains on our body. Even the psychosocial support, which is so critical, so important as well because each one of us, depending upon where we are in our life and what's happening, we might need a little extra help in that area. I'm very, very excited about this expansion of our service, of looking at people as whole people, hopefully being able to support our clients over a lifetime.

Theresa Stern:

I love that. One of the areas I know that you mentioned a little bit earlier when you're talking about people that we've served, some of the new services that we're offering that kind of bring that sort of broad picture like the Canine Buddy and the Orientation and Mobility Immersion and now Adult Canine Buddies. So you really are hitting the spectrum.

Christine Benninger:

We are. And thank you very much for bringing that up because part of that expansion of services, you're right, is expanding the number of programs that we offer. As you well know, orientation and mobility is one of the most challenging skills to get right now here in the US unfortunately. Unfortunately it becomes very difficult. We have many people who apply for a guide dog who don't quite meet the qualifications for orientation and mobility. And being able to offer those services now expands the number of people who can eventually come back and get a guide. And we also know too, that even as a guide dog user, if one's sight has changed over time that when you come back for a new dog, you might need a little bit of a tune-up.

Theresa Stern:

Definitely.

Christine Benninger:

I need tune-ups in a lot of different areas.

Theresa Stern:

Me too. Yeah. Yes.

Christine Benninger:

So our Orientation and Mobility Immersion program has been phenomenal. It absolutely has. And that's a program, the demand is almost unlimited at this point. There's so much demand for that program. And also our Canine Buddy program, oh my goodness. Our amazing Canine Buddies serving both individuals who are too young for a guide dog, but also adults who maybe aren't either ready for a guide dog or don't quite need the services of full guide dog. That companionship makes a huge difference in people's lives.

Theresa Stern:

So as a whole another new sort of area or more expanded area at Guide Dogs for the Blind right now is this canine research sort of division. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Christine Benninger:

Oh my gosh. Very exciting. And not only is this exciting, but it's industry leading. I'm so proud of Guide Dogs for the Blind for being a guide dog school that is sort of stepping out into the future in these ways and sharing the knowledge that we learned to help the industry on a worldwide basis. But we added an amazing individual in July. She is our director of Canine research. Her name is Dr. Sarah-Elizabeth Byosiere. She comes to us with an incredible background, not only in research, but also in dog cognition.

Theresa Stern:

I love that. I swear my dogs are smarter than me. Absolutely.

Christine Benninger:

Well, I know my dogs are smarter than me. Most definitely. But we are on this journey in a number of ways. We are looking to, we're constantly saying, how can we help our dogs be more successful and actualize who they want to be in this world? We're also looking at, the science is telling us now that in addition to making certain that dogs are warm and dry and have good housing and good food and exceptional veterinary care, there's another side that we have to be thinking about. And that's dogs as sentient beings and who they are emotionally as individuals similar to humans. We are sentient beings. We are now starting on this whole journey that Dr. Sarah is helping us with, is really looking at our dogs as sentient beings. How can we support them as sentient beings? And even we've just launched some exciting changes to our puppy raising program.

Theresa Stern:

Do tell.

Christine Benninger:

That is supporting all of this science around dogs as sentient beings. And these changes, which I am super excited about, are really looking at that year that our dogs are with our puppy raisers, is helping our puppy raisers really focus on the relationship that they have with those pups, focusing on allowing our pups to experience the world and really build resilience and confidence because resilience and confidence are the two critical things that are needed in order to be a guide dog, especially in this world. And it's not so much about sitting perfectly on my left side. It's not so much walking perfectly on a leash, that can all be taught by our guide dog mobility instructors. But during this critical time when our pups are between eight weeks of age and 15 months of age, is really building in these critical skills of resilience and confidence. And so some of the changes that are being made are that rather than doing training walks with our guide dog pups, we do adventure walks.

Theresa Stern:

Just even just turning that word makes a different, it makes it a whole difference situation. Yeah.

Christine Benninger:

Exactly.

Theresa Stern:

I love it. Yeah.

Christine Benninger:

Allowing our pups to experience the world, just the way that we allow our children to experience the world. It means they'll make some mistakes. That's okay.

Theresa Stern:

Then they learn to problem solve.

Christine Benninger:

And they learn to problem solve. Exactly right. And the bonus for all of this, it's a lot more fun for the puppy raisers, right?

Theresa Stern:

Yeah. Right. You're not having to be watching every little detail and stressing out, and that stress goes right through the leash to the puppy. Yeah, no, I love it.

Christine Benninger:

Exactly. So we're really excited by all the possibilities that are canine research department can bring, not only to Guide Dogs for the Blind, but also for the entire guide dog industry.

Theresa Stern:

And just, I think even people who have dogs of their own. I think it's very transferable to so many people and relationships and with their animals. I think it's exciting. I can't wait to see how all that goes.

Christine Benninger:

Me too. Absolutely.

Theresa Stern:

So what about the challenges, Chris? I'm sure there's a few of those on the horizon. What kind of challenges are out there and how can all of us sort of help out?

Christine Benninger:

So let me go through some of these. One is costs. We're all feeling it, right? Costs are going up tremendously and particularly veterinary costs. We're dependent. We have approximately 1700 guide dog teams all over North America. We have seven to 900 puppies that are living out in the 10 Western states. We are highly dependent upon community veterinarians to provide veterinary care for our guide dogs and our puppies in our puppy raising program. And veterinary costs are going through the roof right now. We saw over a 20% increase in veterinary costs just in this past year.

Theresa Stern:

Is that right?

Christine Benninger:

Yes.

Theresa Stern:

Wow. Wow.

Christine Benninger:

We have, veterinary care is costing us over $2 million this past year. That's challenging. And particularly when our only source of revenue really is donations. So, concerning. Transportation costs have gone through the roof, we transport a lot of dogs. All of those puppies have to be taken to their puppy raisers. And all of those adult dogs have to be brought back to Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Theresa Stern:

That's right.

Christine Benninger:

When they're ready for training. Transportation costs have gone through the roof. We talk about we are back, we're now breeding as many puppies as we did pre-pandemic, but it also means that we need more puppy raisers. Without puppy raisers we don't have guide dogs, eventually.

Theresa Stern:

No, we don't. That's so important. It's so important. But with this new exciting puppy raising changes, it's a great time for people to get involved.

Christine Benninger:

It's a great time for people to get involved because the program is really a lot more fun. It's easier. And there's also many ways now we've created some new models for puppy raising. So if you're not able to join a club or sort of conform to a club model, there's other ways that you can raise. We're trying to really open up puppy raising to as many people as possible because we definitely need more puppy raisers and we really want to expand that community. There's one other thing I'd like to bring up, and this is something that affects our clients literally on a daily basis, and it's access issues, particularly with ride-share.

Theresa Stern:

It's a big one.

Christine Benninger:

It's a huge issue. Most people are not here.

Theresa Stern:

I'm sweating just thinking of it, Chris. It just stresses me out. It does. It really does.

Christine Benninger:

Yes, it does. And you can talk to any one of our clients and they will tell you just horror stories of calling a ride-share service and being turned down over and over and over and over again, which is literally against the law, right?

Theresa Stern:

Yes. Yeah, absolutely.

Christine Benninger:

The Americans With Disabilities Act requires Certified Service Dog to be able to accompany their person anywhere that that person can go.

Theresa Stern:

That's correct.

Christine Benninger:

But this is now one of the biggest barriers to getting a guide dog, which is the challenges with ride-share. And so we need more people who will stand with us in support of objecting to this with the ride-share services.

Because part of the problem is that the ride-share services are kind of saying, well, there's not that many of you, so we really don't care what you think. That's not good.

Theresa Stern:

That's not good. That's not acceptable.

Christine Benninger:

That's not good.

Theresa Stern:

Not the right answer.

Christine Benninger:

It's not acceptable. So we need more support for helping our clients to be able to freely access ride-share just the way that sighted individuals can.

Theresa Stern:

Absolutely, yes. That's part of helping people live the lives they want to live. I want to be able to get in a ride-share, go to work or go to the airport, take my kid to the dentist, whatever it is. Yeah, absolutely. So yes, you've got some challenges or opportunities, we like to say.

Christine Benninger:

We do have some opportunities. Yes, we do. Yes, we do.

Theresa Stern:

Well, and I think that's a great way. I think our listeners can help with all those different opportunities, which is great as well too. It's very accessible to help out. What about 2024? What are you most excited about for the year to come?

Christine Benninger:

So all these wonderful things that we started seeing in 2023, we will be seeing much more of in 2024. So we're starting more and more we're eating away at our backlog of clients who are waiting for guide dogs. That's exciting to see, our wait times are dropping.

Theresa Stern:

That's great.

Christine Benninger:

Almost daily, which is absolutely fantastic.

Theresa Stern:

We knew we would get there at some point.

Christine Benninger:

Exactly. So seeing many, many more people on our campuses coming back for Guide Dog training, Orientation and Mobility Immersion training, we're starting to run concurrent classes with our guide dog clients and our OMI clients in our residence, which is really fun to see because our clients are learning from each other, which is really wonderful. Continuing this expansion of our services and really looking at our clients as whole people on how we can support them over a lifetime. And I think there's going to be continued wonderful things to come from our canine research department. And all of that will benefit not only the industry, but I believe we'll start to see benefiting, seeing more and more of our dogs being able to take on this role as a guide dog by being able to address their full spectrum of needs, the way that we're looking at clients as whole people.

Theresa Stern:

Well, and volunteers too. You're looking at everybody's individual needs of trying to meet people where they're at, whether they're the dog, the client, or the volunteer.

Christine Benninger:

Exactly. Exactly. So I think there's some exciting things ahead for us. Most definitely.

Theresa Stern:

Oh, well, I'm excited. I'm excited. Now, on a personal note, Chris, you also had a new addition to your family in 2023. Tell us all. We made the first announcement of your sweet, sweet, sweet boy, and now you have a new sweet, sweet boy.

Christine Benninger:

I do. I do. So I think that first announcement was two years ago. My basset hound Boone just had his second birthday, believe it or not.

Theresa Stern:

Oh, my goodness.

Christine Benninger:

And he is a character. He's a good boy. And last August I adopted a little chihuahua by the name of Spencer.

Theresa Stern:

Oh, so dignified.

Christine Benninger:

Well, he's a whopping eight pounds.

Theresa Stern:

Oh my goodness.

Christine Benninger:

And I figured he needed a 50 pound name. So Spencer is a 50 pound name.

Theresa Stern:

I love it.

Christine Benninger:

He is quite the guy. He and Boone adore each other. They sleep together, they play together, they clean each other's faces. But when we go out walking, I now have my beautiful Thea. Thea is a golden retriever and the rock of our family. Oh my God. My Basset Hound Boone and my little chihuahua Spencer, I call them the variety pack.

Theresa Stern:

I love it. Yeah. You have each size.

Christine Benninger:

I do, I do. I do. They're a lot of fun, so thank you. Yes.

Theresa Stern:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, we look forward to talking to you next year to see what else you might have added, because you need a giant dog now. You need the Great Dane or the St. Bernard.

Christine Benninger:

I think the house is full. I Think the house is full at this point.

Theresa Stern:

Well, we'll see about that. All right, well thank you so much, Chris for joining us and thank you for your leadership at Guide Dogs for the Blind, and getting us to the point that we're at now. I'm just so proud to be part of GDB.

Christine Benninger:

Well, thank you, Theresa. It is always a pleasure. Always a pleasure working with you, and it is truly an honor to be a part of this organization, so I appreciate it. Thank you.

Speaker 4:

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