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

Note to listeners, we recorded this episode during the actors strike, so Aria was unable to speak about her leading role in All The Light We Cannot See, but if you'd like to catch her in the series, check out Netflix starting on November 2nd.

Well, hello everyone and welcome, welcome, welcome to Central Bark. I am so excited that you joined us today because we have an amazing guest. Her name is Aria Mia Loberti, and she's here with her guide dog, Ingrid. Today we're going to talk to Aria about her partnership with her amazing Guide dog Ingrid, how that's developed over the years and how she's been able to use her platform to really advocate for things that are important to her. So welcome, Aria. We're so excited to have you here.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Hi. Thank you so much for having me, and it's good to see you. It's been a while.

Theresa Stern: I know it really has. It really has. I think since the gala a year ago.

Aria Mia Lobert...: The gala last year, yeah.

Theresa Stern: The big gala. Yes. Yes. So for those of you who didn't get a chance to go to our Canine Heroes gala, aria was our keynote speaker. She did an amazing job and-

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you.

Theresa Stern: ... probably the cutest thing ever was that Ingrid, her guide dog, little black lab guide dog had pearls on. So we all had to wear pearls, which was awesome.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Ingrid has worn pearls since the day she got home with me after graduation, and she will never leave the house without them. And I thought that was so funny. When GDB proposed to me that was maybe an idea for a theme was Pearls. I was like, oh my God, it's too much. And everyone got to take home a little black lab stuffed animal with a guide dog harness and a pearl necklace, and I'm like, oh, this is too emotional for me.

Theresa Stern: It was really, really awesome. Totally.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, it was great.

Theresa Stern: So tell us a little bit, Aria, about how you got hooked up with the Guide Dogs for the Blind Community.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So I was actually in high school, I really had wanted a guide dog since I was very, very little. And I remember asking an O&M instructor when I was probably far too young, probably like six or something, if I could get a guide dog, and she said that you had to be a little bit more grown up and preferably maybe a little bit taller than the dog. And that was my introduction to starting to think about maybe that lifestyle would be something I want. And I didn't actually do the research properly and embrace it until high school. And I literally looked up every single school that I would be eligible for in the US and Canada and had a couple on my list, but my top choice was Guide Dogs for the Blind because of the training standard and because of all of the positive reinforcement, I really liked that the dogs are just given treats and given cuddles and really made a part of the family.

And that was really cool to me. But even more so than that, I loved the way that the program was market as something really holistic, so it targeted young people, it targeted king users, and it targeted people who obviously want to get a guide dog in a really empowering way that wasn't just, here's a community of people around you that's going to make you a better person or a safer person. It's about you and making you empowered and having the community around you be empowered because you're empowered and vice versa. And I really liked that. So that was what drew me to the school.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, that's so true. I totally agree with you. That was definitely part of my experience too. I think that as a little kid too, that you're interested in having a guide dog and then having gone through and did the research and found the place that really spoke to you. I think that's great. I think it really makes your relationship with Ingrid probably even stronger. So speaking of Ms. Ingrid and your relationship with her, tell me a little bit about the first time you met her.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Oh, gosh. So I went to my training after actually waiting a couple of years for a match, which I'm sure many people listen can relate to. So I got her between the freshmen and sophomore years of college. So it was a bit of a wait time and I was so excited. We scheduled it immediately after the semester was over for me. So I just finished my first year and the dog day arrived and I was actually really nervous. And I think I at that point was questioning, do I just love dogs? Is this really a smart lifestyle choice? How do you-

Theresa Stern: Yeah, that's huge, right? Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: How do you know what to do? And we had a rescue dog at home who was actually really mean, may he rest in peaces. So that was my exposure to having a dog. And I remember just being like, I don't know how this is going to work. And my trainers for class were really wonderful, and my primary assigned trainer was Kelsey. And at the time fiance, now husband Adam had trained Ingrid in harness training. So it was like this big romance dog, and I didn't realize that at the time.

Theresa Stern: I know. It really makes sense with the pearls. Now I'm getting it, it's all clicking.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yes. So she came and knocked on my door at 1:07 PM on a Tuesday afternoon with Ingrid, and Ingrid climbed into my lap and gave me a hug with her two front paws around my shoulders and I-

Theresa Stern: Aww, she chose you. Aww.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, I was kind of like, well, if someone likes you that much from first impressions, you have to give them a try. And so-

Theresa Stern: Absolutely

Aria Mia Lobert...: ... it took us a while. It took us a few days to match. To match was hard. Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Right, right. Well, and speaking of that, I mean, you and Ingrid have now been together for quite a while and your life has gone through just a ton of changes. I mean, everyone's does from college to real adulthood, but yours has especially, you've had lots of really fun and interesting opportunities and done a lot with your life. How has that evolution gone with Ingrid? Can you talk a little bit about how the relationship has developed?

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, of course. I mean, I remember having a moment in the middle of training. Like I said, it took us a good few days to actually match in training. Even though we matched personally, the professional relationship wasn't quite there yet. And so I remember saying to them, actually having a sit down with all of the trainers, I believe in class, is this right? I don't know if I feel right about this. I don't know if this lifestyle works for me. I feel really, really not sure. I don't know. And they were like, well, this is your choice to make. And that night we went on the night route where for the first time, you walk with the dog at night and my vision is much better at night so I was able to really see what she was doing, and I saw a car pull out visually in front of me that I couldn't hear. And I knew that if that happened during the day, if I were just walking on my own or with a cane, oh not with a cane or whatever, I wouldn't have gotten that.

Then I sort of grew to appreciate and realized that this is something that you can embrace. It was really difficult for me. And I think the biggest transition in college was, it was the first time I was around a group of people other than my parents and grandparents that was welcoming to me. Oh, I came from a really bad background in school and I had a lot of abuse and neglect, and I didn't use my cane because I was bullied for it, and it was a trade-off with my physical safety and my mental health. And so a lot of times I'd pick my mental health and I just wouldn't use a cane. Nobody knew I had low vision in my life.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, I can totally relate to all of that. Yes, yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yes. So it was the first time anyone in college knew that I had low vision and there was a puppy raising group for another school, I don't know if I'm allowed to mention which school-

Theresa Stern: Go for it.

Aria Mia Lobert...: ... on campus. It was for Guiding Eyes for the Blind on campus. And people just thought when I came to class that, oh, I was puppy raising for them. It turned into this conversation where for the first time I was explaining myself to other people in a forum that wasn't advocacy related to my own peers in a social setting. And people's faces would just light up and their voices would change, and they would sit next to me in school and they'd want to be my friend. And I never had that before. And all of a sudden, something that I was really bullied for and abused for by adults in power suddenly became something that everyone liked. And so that was the biggest step that I could possibly take. And it happens really fast and it happens in college. So that's really important to me. But obviously a lot's changed since then too.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. But you're making me all teary because as a person with low vision myself, there's just a lot of misinformation about that and people understanding that there's degrees of visual impairment and blindness, and so they just don't get it. But I'm so glad they embraced you.

Aria Mia Lobert...: No, it was really special. And just getting to sort of live my life freely and out in the open, the safety obviously is one thing. Being able to feel safe and comfortable and not have my mental health take a nose dive every time I hold of a cane is wonderful. But also seeing people in school just warm up to the fact that, oh, yeah, sometimes she has no vision, sometimes she has a lot of vision and she's reading a book and whatever, and you can take written notes and not be able to see them sometimes. And then other times be able to see them with magnification or with your naked eye just really close. And those little things that I'm like, oh, I got to break down stereotypes and walls just by being myself. And I don't think that would've happened if I didn't go with that dog.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. They saw the authentic you really. Not having to have that feeling of shame like you don't really fit.

Aria Mia Lobert...: You don't really fit. Yeah. And I know a lot of people struggle with that, especially because I was born with my eye condition, but especially people who go through it later in life and stuff. I see them, people will come up to me and be like, oh, well, I really struggled with that transition. And I'm like, well, I never had that transition. But I think we both are. What we all would have in common, whichever perspective you come from is there's this idea that disability comes from your body. It comes from something your body doesn't do or a sense you don't have or that you don't have the full use of. But it's not. It's the way society treats you-

Theresa Stern: That's right.

Aria Mia Lobert...: ... because everybody experiences everything differently.

Theresa Stern: That's right.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And we embrace it for some things, but not for others. And once we get past that, this concept of not being able, we'll just go out the window and disability will be a whole new reclaimed concept and word. And it's so interesting to me that a dog human bond can be the catalyst for that for so many people. That's really cool.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah. It's like dogs make us more human in some ways, or humane, maybe more humane.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yes.

Theresa Stern: But yeah, no, I think you're right. It's so interesting that other people's lack of imagination could be what can put up the biggest barriers. So you've had a lot going on, a lot of opportunities, and then I know a lot of travel and things like that. Can you talk a little bit about, now you're an adult and sort of in the adult world how Ingrid sort of fits into your life being a person who's traveling a lot and out and about a lot, how you decide what's the right thing for Ingrid and what's the right thing for your partnership? Do you go together? Sometimes separate? Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. No. So I went into Guide Dogs for the Blind's application process with this caveat that I wanted to study abroad in college. Now, I did not have the money to do this by [inaudible 00:13:06] me, but I wanted to do it and I'm like, I'm going to make it possible and can you guys give me a dog that wouldn't care about this upheaval? And I think maybe, I don't know, maybe that was part of the reason why the match took a little while. Maybe it was just because I sprint everywhere. I don't know. And so I got to study in college for a week in Rome actually with my now best friend and a few other students and a professor who was taking some students. And I got to go on a scholarship. And I realized at that point, it was literally in the middle of the semester and we left and went to another country and it was my first time and her first time in another country.

And she loved it. She thought it was the most fun thing she's ever done, and she learned Italian. And now anytime she hears the word bellissima, she thinks it's her name. And it's a bit unfortunate. That's okay. And I'm like, oh, I really did get a good match, someone who would be willing to travel with me. And when I was going into grad school, if I couldn't get a possibility to study financially for a whole semester, grad school is a really nice option because tuition is a bit cheaper abroad, and oftentimes for American students, there are good scholarship opportunities if you study well and work hard. And I ended up receiving my dream scholarship, which was the Fulbright Award to study in England.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh, that's amazing. And congratulations.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you. That was so exciting. It was crazy. And it was just this beautiful experience that I was really looking forward to. And then COVID happened, and so I had one additional guest plane ticket that I could have used on my mom to come with me, and she was going to come help me move into my apartment.

Theresa Stern: Love moms.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And unfortunately, she is quite a high risk for COVID, and I went by myself.

Theresa Stern: Oh, wow.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I didn't see my family for 18 months. And because of the quarantine restrictions in England, I barely was allowed to leave my apartment for most of that time.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So if my dog didn't enjoy upheaval, I don't know how we would've managed. So whenever anyone asked me how she likes traveling, I'm like, yes, we're now on our 12th country. And yes, we literally are on a plane probably every week, every other week. We are on planes a lot. It's just ridiculous. But really, that's what she lives for. She's much happier when she does that. And I think with England, she was just so happy to be someplace new and we could go out and walk through the woods. We lived in a gorgeous campus and there was a legit castle on the campus.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh.

Aria Mia Lobert...: She loved it. And that was sort of the catalyst for a lot of my current travel that I can't unfortunately talk about today. But I was just really happy that I have a dog who's ready to embrace that lifestyle.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Now I'm currently doing a lot of work for UNICEF-

Theresa Stern: Yeah, tell us about that. I love to-

Aria Mia Lobert...: That's been my first exposure actually, aside from the work itself. But that's been my first exposure to traveling and not making the choice on my own to not take Ingrid.

Theresa Stern: Oh, okay.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So I think that's a really interesting thing is everyone on both sides of the travel on my end and on the UNICEF side would fully supported, if I had chosen to take her, we would've found a way to work around it, which is really beautiful, and that's what you want, but you're going to work with a lot of young kids who may have never encountered a dog or not encounter one in a positive way. And I visited a country that-

Theresa Stern: You've got to be respectful and of all that.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And just visiting a country that had a lot of wild dogs and being like, that's one thing I don't want to worry about too much. I want to be able to focus on the kids and on what they need and on being an advocate for them. So I didn't take her, and that was really our first... She slept over my parents and stuff and had vacay.

Theresa Stern: With grandma.

Aria Mia Lobert...: But that was our first time away from each other. We had a whole week away from each other. So that was very interesting to experience. But yeah, it's been nice to embrace. I've always done human rights advocacy and usually through the lens of education and disability and gender for the first time, making it not a fight for my own wellbeing to aid others in the process of fighting for myself, but fighting for those who don't have someone. It's been an amazing experience and again, really interesting to watch people react to... It's one of the first times that I know of where you have someone who has a mobility aid who's the one fighting for the human rights. It usually disability ends up being a bit of a pity party.

Theresa Stern: That's right.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And doesn't get to be a champion. And so I'm like, so nice to see that image change that you can be the champion, you can be supported as well. But those two things come together and they're not mutually exclusive. And trying to change that dominant hegemonic kind of idea of what it means to be a person who can make change. So I really embrace that. And having Ingrid as sort of the vehicle or the symbol of my disability or my blindness or my visual impairment is really special. So yeah, I really like it.

Theresa Stern: Well, I think this just is such an amazing fit for you, just having seen, you did the wonderful Ted Talk many, many years ago, and it was really all about using your voice for good and allyship and really speaking up for people who maybe don't have a voice right now. And this is just such a great opportunity for you. And thank you for using your voice in this way.

Aria Mia Lobert...: No, well, I think that's what this organization does really well, because it gives clients a way to feel empowered in themselves. And that means a lot of different things for people. And I'm not saying to the people who are listening to this who might be terrified by public speaking or by traveling or whatever. But you have the power by embracing yourself to create change just by being you. And I think that's what's really special is that Guide Dogs for the Blind isn't trying to change you-

Theresa Stern: No.

Aria Mia Lobert...: ... it's not trying to make you hide something that makes you unique or hide yourself at the same time, it's not trying to make you embrace your low visionness or your blindness as just the only part of your identity that makes you interesting. It's about the whole person. And I think that's what is so special about the bond.

Theresa Stern: So Aria, can you tell me a little bit about your new work that you're doing with L'Occitane?

Aria Mia Lobert...: They are such a wonderful brand that has been one of these big skincare fixtures for a really long time. So it's been an honor to work with them, and it was an honor to get a request from them to be the face of their brand. Obviously the products are wonderful. And I have a really interesting story actually about my first encounters with them. I come from a pretty working class, lower middle class family, and that price point was definitely not totally accessible to us. But whenever I was in college and I would get to go to an academic conference or I would be at an advocacy thing and I'd stay at a hotel and the hotel had L'Occitane products, that was the biggest deal because not only were they fantastic, but they would all have braille on them. And my braille is not the best, but it's enough to kind of pass by.

And it was just so cool for me to have these beautiful products in a hotel room that I could tell the difference between the shampoo and the conditioner without having to zoom in on my phone or use an app or FaceTime my mom or whatever, like, Hey, mom.

Theresa Stern: Exactly. Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: They were beautiful too. Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. I love that. They thought of us.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, no, I think we all kind of relate to that no matter where we are on the vision spectrum, having a bunch of packages that look the same and struggling to identify what they are. And sometimes scent only gets you so far, but they've had this commitment to accessibility, I believe, since their inception in the 70s. I could be wrong. They have proceeds for some of their products that will go to preventable blindness, which I think is really wonderful in the developing world. But they also make it their mission to make their products successful to those of us who may not have preventable or curable conditions and sort of just championing blindness as a culture. And they've done that long before they ever got to me. And so it's just been really wonderful to have this open conscious dialogue with this very international brand.

I also do a lot of climate rights advocacy, and they're very sustainable as well. They try to be as fully sustainable as possible. A lot of their packaging is either reusable completely or recyclable and biodegradable. So on top of the braille, they're creating that type of change too.

And what I've seen more recently, again, this predates my involvement with the brand, but more recently for them is this commitment to universal designs. So without the braille, or for someone like me who is low vision, but my braille kind of sucks, is being to be able to pick up bottles of perfume at the store and feel, oh, there's a rose etched onto that bottle and a lavender leaf on that one and a lemon on this one. And be able to just feel that on the bottle And then have the option of the braille as well. It's universal design and it makes everyone's experience better because if you're visually seeing them on a shelf, obviously it's beautiful, but then it helps everyone else too, and it helps us use the products more easily. And I just think it's fantastic. And I couldn't say enough good about them.

Theresa Stern: Sounds like a fabulous partnership.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, let's get them in the GDB dorms.

Theresa Stern: Let's do it. I'm all about it. Yeah. So if you could say a few words to somebody who maybe is experiencing vision loss or has a friend or family member experiencing vision loss and considering this guide dog lifestyle, what's some advice that you might give to them?

Aria Mia Lobert...: I think I obviously always was enamored by the concept of the lifestyle since I was really little. But at the same time when I got there, like I said, I was really nervous about it and if it would be the right fit for me. And I was nervous about taking that step and showcasing that side of me to the world for the first time in a way that would hopefully make me feel more comfortable. And that worked for me. It was an amazing catalyst survey, like I told you about the people in college and how wonderful they were. But I know that that's really scary sometimes to think about because so often the culture we live in treats disability in general, but blindness especially as something that's not good and something that you should hide or that's something that's deviant in some way. And I think that's true of any historically marginalized group.

But I see with so many other groups that there's this change happening in the last few years where there is a beauty and a pride in embracing who you are. And I don't think this is any different than that. And I know that it can seem really scary, but it's because we're fighting generations upon generations. Even millennia, my PhD work was in ancient rhetoric and ancient history, even millennia of people telling you that you're other and that you're different, and to sit down and shut up in different varieties or different versions of that.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And then we're fighting a hundred years of movies where we don't have the option of playing ourselves and being the heroes of our own story. So all of those things, even if you haven't directly been told them in your life and you're started by square people, they feed on you. And it's implicit. It becomes implicit in our culture that this is deviant and this is bad. And that narrative is starting to change. And it's changed before I came along, but it's changing now with some of the work that I've been able to do that's been able to reach new audiences. And I'm really grateful for that. But I think it's not just people who are in the limelight, so to speak, or in the public eye who are making that change. The real change comes from people who are just living their lives in day to day, experiencing the world and sharing the beauty of themselves with the world around them.

And maybe for you that is getting a guide dog, maybe it's not, and that's okay. But I think you have to decide what is best for you and what is going to make you feel powerful every morning when you get up out of bed. How can you be the best version of yourself? And for me, that's having a dog by my side and-

Theresa Stern: Yes. In Pearls.

Aria Mia Lobert...: ... having that support. In pearls.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I think it's a big step, but it's a good one for a lot of people. And take the time to learn about it and do your research and test it out and talk to as many people as you can And find the thing that makes you feel powerful. That was my advice.

Theresa Stern: That's fabulous advice. Aria, I want to thank you so much for joining us today and looking forward to maybe having you back at Central bark to talk a little bit more. Yeah [inaudible 00:27:18]-

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, I would love that.

Theresa Stern: ... other opportunities that have come your way?

Aria Mia Lobert...: Wink, wink.

Theresa Stern: Wink, wink. Nod, nod.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: But thank you, thank you, thank you so much.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you so much, and I look forward to speaking with you hopefully very soon, when hopefully some good change can come from my union's negotiations and it can open up more discussions. But I know as many of you who probably listen to this podcast, believe everyone deserves a fair living wage and fair treatment, and that's what we're fighting for right now, so I'll stay silent in the meantime, but hit me up in a few weeks since this is over.

Theresa Stern: That's right. It just gives us something great to look forward to, so that's always good. Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: No, it does. That's good.

Theresa Stern: If you'd like to hear more from Aria, join us for our holiday celebration on December 10th. Aria will speak more about how her increased self-confidence and independence has helped her to achieve her acting goals. You can either join us at home virtually, or in person in Oregon or California on December 10th.

You can find out more information on our website. I hope you'll join us from wherever you may be on December 10th. For more information about Guide Dogs for the Blind, please visit guidedogs.com.