Rebecca: Thanks for tuning in to Central Bark. This is Rebecca ...

Eric: And Eric.

Rebecca: Puppy raising volunteers for Guide Dogs for the Blind. We're currently raising Dublin in the Snohomish Washington Puppy Club. My favorite thing about volunteering with Guide Dogs for the Blind is the amazing support the organization gives from birth all the way through their guide dog life and even into retirement.

Eric: And my favorite thing about volunteering with Guide Dogs for the Blind is the fabulous community that supports all around.

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

Hello everyone, and welcome to Central Bark. Today we are joined by one of our amazing GDB clients. Her name is Kym Dekeyrel, and she's going to talk to us about her journey with her retired guide dog Citrus and about her passion for CrossFit. So welcome. Welcome, welcome, Kym.

Kym Dekeyrel: Oh, thank you for having me. I'm excited. That's great.

Theresa Stern: Awesome. So tell us, Kym, tell us a little bit about your journey with Guide Dogs for the Blind, how they became part of Guide Dogs for the Blind Community. How did you join up with us?

Kym Dekeyrel: Well, it was what, 11? 12? No, it's a really long time ago now. 13 years ago, probably right when I had become retinitis pigmentosa. So I was diagnosed with RP when I was five. So I've been losing my vision since I was five years old. So by my mid twenties, I have lost most of my vision, and I was starting to have a harder time getting around, and it just finally came to the point that it was my husband that really said, "Se should look into a guide dog. I think it's time." We had one young son, and then actually when I applied for Citrus, I then was pregnant with our second son, and we knew it would be something good for our family and good for me being independent with my kids. And so I live in San Jose, California and Guide Dogs for the Blind is in San Rafael. So that was the school that I instantly connected to, and it was just an amazing experience from the very beginning, from the first phone calls and then deciding what to do. Then I was pregnant and deciding, okay, let's wait.

Theresa Stern: It's a lot. Right?

Kym Dekeyrel: Until right after I had the baby and then I got Citrus, and I just remember even getting to train with her with this tiny baby strapped to my chest in a Baby Bjorn feeling like ... there were people coming out of their houses. Like, oh my gosh, this is the cutest.

Theresa Stern: I was going to say, you were getting double cute. Cute for baby. Cute for puppy. Oh my gosh. So tell me about that. That's really interesting. I don't think we've really talked to any guests right now that had wee ones when they were training with a guide dog. So did you come into class for Citrus? Come into our residential program? Or did we serve you in your home?

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah, we did in-home training. My older son, Cooper was four and Easton was just born. So that was a wonderful thing about being close. We did go up to the campus, me and my trainer.

Theresa Stern: All right, so you got that. Okay.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah, we went up a few times and trained there, but mostly they came to me and we did the neighborhoods and did the schools and really learned where I was going to be spending my life, and it was really the start of just such a huge change of confidence of who I am as a blind person. It really was the catalyst of most rewarding changes of my life.

Theresa Stern: Wow, that's amazing. That's amazing. So I just can't imagine, having gotten the guide dog myself a few times over the years, and then juggling that with the kids at home. Do you have any tips maybe for other Guide dog users or people who might be considering a guide dog with little ones at home?

Kym Dekeyrel: Oh, if you're considering it, then do it. Because what was the best is [inaudible 00:04:58] parent, being a mom and being blind. I always had that nervousness that my kids would be [inaudible 00:05:06] of having a disabled parent or, I had always have my blind mom or whatever.

Theresa Stern: Right, right, right.

Kym Dekeyrel: Do you know how cool you are with a dog? You're just so cool. I would go, I'd bring Citrus into Cooper's classrooms to show them what a guide dog can do, and just having my kids like Cooper bragging to his friends, my dog can come on campus and yours can't. It really, it changed the dynamic of our family. It made it so different also between having a cane and a dog, is the dog is [inaudible 00:05:51] than a cane.

And just having that feeling, that confidence that I could walk my kid up to soccer practice independently at any time, and having my family, having my husband feel that peace of mind that we would be okay and we would be safe. We had not only a guide, but just a companion that was always watching out for my kids as well.

Theresa Stern: Is that right? I was going to ask that of you, so he took them on a little bit too?

Kym Dekeyrel: Even when they were little. I'd even have to say, Easton, you have to walk in front because Citrus keeps looking back.

Theresa Stern: Trying to make sure you're with us.

Kym Dekeyrel: Oh my gosh. You coming? Come on.

Theresa Stern: The whole pack.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah, we became Citrus's herd. Really.

Theresa Stern: I love it. That is so awesome.

Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. So how long did you work with Citrus? I know that you've recently retired her.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yes. Yes. Well, I got Citrus when she was one and a half, and she is now 12 and a half.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness.

Kym Dekeyrel: I know. She's my old girl.

Theresa Stern: How's she doing? Tell us a little bit about her personality. Just curious about her.

Kym Dekeyrel: Citrus is funny. I think obviously she's gotten older, she's gotten more sassy because she's a little more like, "Yeah, I'm going to do what I'm going to do now". But she's always been funny. I don't know if it's a breeding thing in guide dogs or what. She's the only lab I've ever met that won't even walk on wet grass. She hates water. I've never had to worry that I would walk through a puddle with her because she would gladly cross streets. She hates other dogs. She can't be bothered by them.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. She thinks she's a people. Yeah.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah. Even now, she still comes, she's retired, but she still comes to work with me every day and other people will say like, "Oh, can my dog meet your dog?" And I feel like I'm going to the back, "Citrus. You just have to come up here. Just pretend. Just say hi. I'm sorry".

Theresa Stern: Don't embarrass me.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah. "I'll give you treats". I feel like she's like a teenager that's like, "Ugh, I have to mingle with these commoners". Yeah.

Theresa Stern: I love it. She sounds amazing.

Kym Dekeyrel: She's snooty. Yeah, she's just wonderful. Right, she's perfect in her way, she has her quirks for sure.

Theresa Stern: Yes, yes, yes. I love that though. She sounds like definitely a sassy pants. I like that.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yes. She always lays with her feet crossed. So whenever people say, is it a boy or a girl? I'm like, what? She is obviously a girl.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness. So I know still fresh for you, I'm sure the decision to retire her. Can you walk us through a little bit of how that works? Just I think many people in our audience may not know what a huge decision that is.

Kym Dekeyrel: And I didn't know. I actually then went on Facebook seeking information just of the ... I didn't know. Okay, so Citrus was 10 years old basically during Covid and everything changed anyway. Right. We weren't walking around.

Theresa Stern: That's right.

Kym Dekeyrel: So it's almost like she went into this phase retirement anyway, kind of with Covid.

Theresa Stern: Semi retired, yeah. Yeah.

Kym Dekeyrel: And then when it became like, okay, she is now 12 years old, and so it just seemed like the next step to start the application to get her successor, but I didn't know how emotional it would be for me.

I had no idea that [inaudible 00:10:16] guide dogs, and they basically just rambled emotionally for 30 minutes, trying not to cry because even though she wasn't really working hard anymore, I don't know, it was a big decision, but I did just say, so when Guide Dogs for Blind came out and started my new guide dog application, I took Citrus out basically for her final, it was her final exam, her final walk, and it's like she knew, I'm not kidding, she was so spot on. It was like she was one and a half again, crossing, doing everything she was supposed to. And that was even the second we got back to my house and it was done. I can't even thinking about now, it was emotional because it was like-

Theresa Stern: Yeah, of course.

Kym Dekeyrel: Citrus, we did it. And her life hasn't changed since. She's sitting on the floor right next to me right now.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah.

Kym Dekeyrel: And I get a lot of questions after that saying, "Well, do you have to give her away?" I'm like, "No. I am blessed that I do not. I have a house that she's going to be just fine". Her life is changing barely any, but it's really tough.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Well, we'll have to have you come back on when you get partnered with your new guide. We can see what Citrus thinks of that.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah, I was going to say, you'll have to interview Citrus and she'll be like, "So this dog, it's not staying. Right?"

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness. So let's switch gears a little bit here. I read that you are super into CrossFit. I am so impressed. Tell me a little bit about how you discovered CrossFit and how you've made it accessible.

Kym Dekeyrel: So I lost my vision completely about 10 years ago. I also have lupus and autoimmune disease, and I ended up going into total liver failure, and had to have a bunch of emergency surgeries, and it was all terrible, but I lived through the surgery, but when I came out of the surgery, any vision I had was gone. And it was really hard, because there is such a huge difference between what I consider visually impaired, and then totally blind, and it changed everything. My confidence, I became the shell of who I was. And in my past life, I grew up a dancer. I have a degree in dance.

Theresa Stern: Oh, you do.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah. I was a professional ballerina and stuff for a while, but as I lost my vision, that became obvious that I could no longer continue dancing, because dance is a very kill or be killed part.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. It's so precise depending on ...

Kym Dekeyrel: And it was very much if I went to an audition and I even said, "Can I stand in front? I'm visually impaired". I would be cut instantly because that's just a liability. I lived with, not ashamed of being blind or visually impaired, but I hid it. I hid it all the time. I would go out of my way to never admit to anybody that I couldn't see very well. I was always so hesitant. And that's where Citrus actually started changing my life. At least she became a neon sign that people would come up to me and say, "Oh, are you training this dog? And I'd say-

Theresa Stern: No,

Kym Dekeyrel: "She's mine". So I was starting to be able to break that ice, but my husband had been going to a CrossFit gym, and I was always so sad or jealous or something that he had this thing and I had nothing. I didn't dance anymore. I didn't see anymore. Then one day he came home and he said, "You are going to the gym with me". And I said, "No, no, I'm not going to the gym with you". And he said, "Yeah, you are". And I cried all the way there, and I really, it wasn't that I couldn't do it, I knew I couldn't do it, because how, I've never seen a barbell, I'd never seen all of these things my life.

Theresa Stern: Right. There's all that little equipment things that they use for CrossFit.

Kym Dekeyrel: And when I went to my first class, people started coming in and he had told people I was going to be there, and they were saying, "Oh, we came to support Kym for her first class".

And by the time I left, I knew I had found something, not that I just could do, but I knew it was something I could love. And so I also had two kids and I had a job, and I started being like, "Well, okay, maybe I can fit it in two days a week". And then I started realizing how much it was meant to be in my life. And I joke now, you just start learning to sleep faster, because two days turned into five days turned into seven days. And then I discovered that there's something called adaptive CrossFit, and [inaudible 00:16:19] competitions within other CrossFit competitions for adaptive divisions.

Theresa Stern: Really? Oh, cool.

Kym Dekeyrel: So I remember writing an email saying, "Hi, does blind count?" And they said, and when everything started to change, I really, really changed because I was the first blind athlete to compete in two of the largest international CrossFit competitions in the world.

And that was in 2019. And it really gave me a voice within the community, and it really gave me a confidence that I felt liberated from always being afraid to admit that I was blind. And it was during my very first CrossFit competition that I was doing the competition, and somebody came up to me during the competition and said, "Wow, you're out there and you're doing this, and we just found out that you can't see, that you're blind". And it was the first time I was able to say, "Yeah, I am. Yeah, I'm blind". And like I said, I was a dancer and could never admit to people that I couldn't see. And so to have people celebrate me for what I could do, instead of what I didn't have, it changed everything. And so I wanted more, and I started signing up for more, and I established, I guess a name for myself on social media, where I've been able to share my story and not just like, "Oh, I do CrossFit and I'm amazing."

It's like sharing the reality of being blind, but we can still do incredible things, live normal lives, and not give into the excuse of not being able to see. I mean, I'm not kidding. Right before I just got on the call with you, I just volunteered for the first time as yard duty at my kid's school, and my husband at the end thought it would be great to say, "Yes, my wife can go work in making sure the kids are washing their hands in the bathroom". And I got all panicky. And I'm like, what? Wow. But honestly, this world of CrossFit has made me able to say to myself, "Kym, you can do really hard things. You can go stand in a bathroom and tell little girls to wash their hands, wash your hands. You can do it".

Theresa Stern: I can hear you washing your hands or not.

Kym Dekeyrel: But those things, I would avoid them like the plague before I would've never gone and stood out there for yard duty. No way. And so as much as people now reach out to me and say like, "Oh, you've changed my life. You've changed my life as a parent", it's 100% the opposite. All of these voices now that reach out to me, they've changed my life. I mean, you guys asking me to be on this, it changes my view of who I am, and I realize I'm more than I ever imagined. Because when you're five years old and you're constantly reminded, someday you're going to go blind, someday you're going to go blind. It makes you sad and you dread it so much. And then realizing, okay, life is more than being able to see. So let's see what we can do. And I actually just came back this weekend. I competed in my very first able-bodied three day long competition, no adaptive division, no modifications for being blind. And I signed up, well, I had to qualify, which I did. And I just wanted to see if I could do it, if I could fit in with able bodied, fully sighted, fully everything, and pushed to see my capabilities, and obviously my husband was allowed to be my guide. They weren't just, "Go swim across the lake".

Theresa Stern: Yeah, go figure it out. Right. Yeah.

Kym Dekeyrel: And it was such a rewarding experience. It was hard as all heck. But I just love, now that I can continue to, I guess they say, inspire others or motivate others, but really it's all the other way around. These people that come up to me and say, "Wow, you make me want to do more". I think, oh, okay. This is why I keep doing it. And having my kids, one of my sons Cooper, he is 15 now.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh, wow.

Kym Dekeyrel: He's 15. And to have my 15 year old say, "Mama, will you come be a speaker at my school?" I think I didn't want my parents anywhere near my school.

Theresa Stern: Right.

Kym Dekeyrel: He wants his blind mom to come talk.

Theresa Stern: He's so proud of you. Yeah, yeah.

Kym Dekeyrel: I know. And that's why I'm like, "Okay, I'll keep doing this.'

Theresa Stern: Yeah. No, I love your philosophy about how people say you inspire me, but then they actually inspire you because it's not like you only need one inspiration. It's like every day sometimes there's something that you're like, yard duty. Okay, I can step up. I can do this. You have to kind of talk yourself into it. And so I think, I love that you have a platform for, like you said, motivating folks, and then also that you're gaining from that, and that you're looking at your life in a way that's about what's possible, in fact possible is part of your email address I see. So I love that too. Yeah. I'm really inspired-

Kym Dekeyrel: And learning to be able to ... things that used to crush my soul. Now you learn to laugh about things that are really hard when you can't see, and the little things, putting the mayonnaise on something instead of peanut butter or whatever. Doing these ridiculous blind things, walking straight into the wall for the Nth time.

Theresa Stern: That's right. Yeah. I just did a sitting on a bench that wasn't there. Yeah. Stuff like that. Yeah. Yeah.

Kym Dekeyrel: My husband always says-

Theresa Stern: Yeah, you just have to laugh.

Kym Dekeyrel: Kym knows where all the secret doors are. She's just finding them.

Theresa Stern: She's finding them. Exactly.

Kym Dekeyrel: When I turned and walked right into the wall.

I love it.

Theresa Stern: Well, I love your relationship that you have with your husband too, and that it probably took some courage for him to push you to go to CrossFit for the first time. He probably didn't want to have to get in trouble with you. And he's like, you're going. So that's great too. I love that.

Kym Dekeyrel: He's always known me better than I've known myself, and I really couldn't do any of it without him. I mean, even this past weekend, I was the one competing, technically, I was the name on the leaderboard, but he was tethered to me and swam across the lake with me. He did the hike and the trail runs with me. We ran the 800 meter dash together. He's on the competition floor with me the whole time, making sure I am safe or that my feet are across the correct line. I can get through class on my own or whatever. But he is also there making sure I have what I need or that I am safe. But in these competitions, I am we, it's us, and it's really fun that we do it together. And he is a mix of really mean and really nice. And so he really pushes me. He's out there, "Don't put that barbell down." He's a very natural coach. And it's great. It's really our love story too.

Theresa Stern: It really is.

Kym Dekeyrel: This whole CrossFit journey.

Theresa Stern: Oh, this is so sweet. Yeah. Well, and I love, it's so true, and I think all throughout your story, just talking with you today is that sort of thread of partnerships. So you've had this wonderful partnership with Citrus and with your kids and with your husband, and then partnership with people that you're sort of mentoring. And I feel like that's such an important part to sort of happiness. And you seem like a very happy person. I feel inspired by you.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah. It's easy to, give in to the darkness. It's easy to just say, fine, I'll stay home or fine, I won't do it. And I became that. When I came out of that liver surgery, that's what I became. And it was so hard. And to then find this light, and to be able to share it, it's been so wonderful. And even this last October, because October is Blindness Awareness Month, CrossFit released in my honor, and with me, a workout called Finding the Light, and gyms and people from all over the world, literally all over the world participated-

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh.

Kym Dekeyrel: ... In the workout. And we raised a ton of money for Foundation for Fighting Blindness.

Theresa Stern: Oh, wonderful.

Kym Dekeyrel: And then CrossFit then released the documentary about my life, Finding the Light. So if you want to [inaudible 00:27:20].

Theresa Stern: Yeah, can you tell us how we can see that? I would love to see that.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah. You can go onto ... CrossFit has their YouTube channel and type in finding the light or just Google search, finding the light, Kym Dekeyrel, and it'll pop up. And it's a documentary about my story, and we're getting ramped up now to ... October 1st is coming up, and-

Theresa Stern: It sure is, yeah.

Kym Dekeyrel: Getting ready to get the second annual, I guess, Finding the Light workout, getting people to do it again this year to raise money and raise awareness.

Theresa Stern: Fantastic.

Kym Dekeyrel: I know. It's so fantastic.

Theresa Stern: I'm going to look this up. Maybe I'll try CrossFit.

Kym Dekeyrel: [inaudible 00:28:10]. Anybody can do it.

Theresa Stern: It's a little bit about CrossFit. Can you tell us just a little bit about the sport, just for folks who aren't familiar?

Kym Dekeyrel: Yes. So CrossFit is really everything. Think of the idea of cross training. And when I say in a competition that I swam across the lake and did this trail run, yeah, that's like competition, but if you walk into a CrossFit gym, you are going to be learning how to do weightlifting, like Olympic weightlifting, power lifting. You're going to learn gymnastic skills like box jumps or step ups, or learn how to do handstands and pull ups. And you run, or ride bikes, but people don't understand. They get so terrified of this idea of CrossFit. There are people at our gym that have been going there for 10 years, and they've never learned how to do a handstand. You do something else, or it's very ... everybody's on their own journey, and that's what makes that it so cool is everybody fits in. So I might do box jumps, because those are my blind party tricks that everybody seems to think is so cool, but other people might be stepping up to a six inch plate.

Theresa Stern: Right.

Kym Dekeyrel: Whatever. It can be as crazy as you want it to be, or as simple as you want it to be. And it's a class environment. And so there's people that are always there to support you. Everybody really is positive and supportive, and it's just kind of a mishmash of anything you can think of, but in an organized way.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. No, that sounds great. I love the idea that it's really individually tailored to what your goals are, and your body and what your body can do and maybe never [inaudible 00:30:10] do.

Kym Dekeyrel: Right. Some people want to compete, some people want to do it so they can drink a lot of beer on the weekends. Some people-

Theresa Stern: That's always a good goal.

Kym Dekeyrel: ... do it to rehab injuries or lose weight or whatever.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh, that's amazing. I love it. I love it. Love it. So what's next for you?

Kym Dekeyrel: Oh, well, actually this week I will start some qualifiers to try for the, hopefully fourth year in a row, go back and be the only blind athlete to compete in one of these big international competitions. But otherwise, just living the dream of being a mom and a wife and a massage therapist. My husband and I work together as well. He's a chiropractor and I'm a massage therapist, so-

Theresa Stern: Wow. That's great.

Kym Dekeyrel: ... We do it. My kids both play ice hockey travel, so-

Theresa Stern: Really? Ice hockey. Yeah.

Kym Dekeyrel: Yeah. So we're everywhere all the time.

Theresa Stern: Busy, busy family, I'm sure, yeah.

Oh my gosh.

Kym Dekeyrel: Guide dogs need to know how to run. They need to go fast everywhere. We're always on the go, but balancing everything.

Theresa Stern: That's fantastic. Well, oh my gosh, Kym, this has been so much fun. Thank you so much for joining us.

Kym Dekeyrel: Thank you for having me.

Theresa Stern: Keep us posted, keep us posted on all your CrossFit journeys and let us know when you're coming back into class for your successor guide dog. We'll want to know about that and give lots of hugs and kisses to Citrus.

Kym Dekeyrel: No, we're in process. Yes I will.

Theresa Stern: All right. Thank you so much.

Kym Dekeyrel: Thank you.

Speaker 6: Thanks for tuning into Central Bark.

Theresa Stern: For more information about Guide Dogs for the Blind, please visit guidedogs.com.