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. I am so excited about today's episode, because today, we have our annual opportunity to sit down and chat with Christine Benninger, our president and CEO at Guide Dogs for the Blind. We're going to ask Chris to tell us a little bit about some of the wonderful highlights from 2024, and give us a little sneak peek at what we can expect for 2025. Welcome, Chris. I can't believe it's been a year since we've chatted on Central Bark. Welcome, welcome.

Christine Benni...: Thank you, Theresa. I always love being here. And honestly, I can't believe it's been a year as well. Wow.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Christine Benni...: It went by fast.

Theresa Stern: Before we get into all the nitty-gritty guide dog stuff, anything exciting happening in your life this last year? Did you adopt any more dogs or cats or goats or turtles to add to your menagerie?

Christine Benni...: Yeah, I can't remember what I told to whoever, but at the very end of last year, I adopted a little Chihuahua, so I now have three dogs.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness.

Christine Benni...: Yes. His name is Spencer, which is very... It's a big name for a very little boy. He's eight pounds.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness.

Christine Benni...: But he fits in well with the pack. He can hike up to 10 miles.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Okay. Spencer.

Christine Benni...: I know

Theresa Stern: With those little feet, that's a lot of steps.

Christine Benni...: I know.

Theresa Stern: Put your Fitbit on him.

Christine Benni...: Yeah, no kidding. Yeah. When I'm not in the office, he likes to sit in my chair.

Theresa Stern: [inaudible 00:02:02]. Okay.

Christine Benni...: It looks like we have a new CEO.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Okay. Well, that's handy. Good. Really good. Well then, you and I can go on a little trip somewhere. We'll just leave Spencer in charge.

Christine Benni...: You got it. You got it. Yes. Yes. He's easily swayed though with a cookie, just [inaudible 00:02:20]-

Theresa Stern: Oh, that is true. That's true. The budget might end up going up a little bit with Spencer in charge.

Christine Benni...: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

Theresa Stern: Very good. Well, tell us a little bit about Guide Dogs for the Blind, about 2024. Any things that you are particularly proud of? I know a lot of great stuff has happened.

Christine Benni...: Oh, I am always particularly proud of Guide Dogs for the Blind. I don't know why I'm tearing up. Why am I doing that? But when I say I am proud, it's because we have this amazing community, and everything that happens here and the growth that takes place and all of the new things that are going on, which I'll touch a little bit about, it's all because of this amazing community of staff, of volunteers, of puppy raisers, and donors. I mean, we can't do what we do without all of you. So, I am grateful. I am incredibly grateful.

But just a few things that I'm super proud about. This last year, we increased the number of clients served by 29%.

Theresa Stern: Holy moly, Chris. That's amazing.

Christine Benni...: Yes.

Theresa Stern: I love it.

Christine Benni...: [inaudible 00:03:38].

Theresa Stern: That's huge.

Christine Benni...: It's been a long road out of COVID.

Theresa Stern: Oh my gosh, yes.

Christine Benni...: Everybody has been working hard, and it's really exciting to see those numbers, and they're only going to go up into the right as we go forward into '25. So, I think that's very exciting. Some of the other things that happen a little bit behind the scenes that I think are really exciting is the work that is being done by our canine research and development department-

Theresa Stern: Oh, yeah.

Christine Benni...: ... all around the new science around dog cognition, the dogs as sentient beings. And based on that research, we're making critical changes into our programs, and it started with our puppy raising program. I think you've talked about some of those changes.

Theresa Stern: Yes. Yeah, we're going to do more. We're going to do more, because it's really cool.

Christine Benni...: There's going to be more.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Christine Benni...: It's really cool. We're starting to see dogs come back who have been raised under the new protocols, and we have very, very, very high hopes. It's all looking really positive that this is going to be a positive game changer for Guide Dogs.

Theresa Stern: I love how it really... This new way of looking at things is really looking at each individual as an individual and each dog as an individual. I think for those of us who are around dogs enough, especially those of us who've had guide dogs for a long time, it really makes so much sense that these dogs are so smart. They are absolutely these sentient beings that have feelings. I'm super excited to see how our relationship with our dogs becomes even more strong over time with the way that we're going.

Christine Benni...: I so appreciate you saying that because so much of the theory is around strengthening that relationship. This is just a really small example, but I think it has big ramifications. It's even in the language that we use. So, the language that we're asking our puppy raisers to use, our breeder custodians to use, our trainers to use is that we don't use the word command anymore. We use the word ask.

Theresa Stern: Nice.

Christine Benni...: So, we ask our dog versus command our dog. What I think is so interesting about that is that even when you say those two words, you get a totally different feeling, right?

Theresa Stern: Absolutely.

Christine Benni...: It's just a great example of how that changes the relationship. If I'm asking somebody to do something, that's a different relationship than commanding somebody to do something.

Theresa Stern: We all know, any of us who were ever kids-

Christine Benni...: Oh my God.

Theresa Stern: ... or who have kids, know that it's so much better to have that sort of buy-in to want to do something, to be willing rather than being told to do it, so it totally makes sense.

Christine Benni...: Absolutely. I was the kid who was commanded by my mother and always would say, "No."

Theresa Stern: No. Before even the command was out of her mouth, it was, "No."

Christine Benni...: Yeah. No, I'm not. Anyways.

Theresa Stern: So, you've got that going on. We've got the new sort of puppy-raising protocols happening. The world was really changing in 2024. There's just a lot going on, and I know Guide Dogs for the Blind must have really felt that as well. Can you tell us about maybe some of the challenges that you had over the last year?

Christine Benni...: Yeah. I think probably one of the biggest challenges that we collectively have had, and the reason I say collectively because these really are challenges for our clients, and as they are challenges for our clients, they're clearly challenges for us, and that's all the barriers to access. What is discouraging for me is that here we are in 2024, right?

Theresa Stern: Mm-hmm.

Christine Benni...: This is not 1950.

Theresa Stern: No. No, it's not. Yeah.

Christine Benni...: And there seems to be more barriers to access for our clients using Guide Dogs than less. And it's coming from all areas. Probably the biggest one, of course, is rideshare and how often our clients are denied a ride because they're traveling with a guide dog. And even though it's against the law, right?

Theresa Stern: Yeah, 100%.

Christine Benni...: It's happening all the time. But our clients, I hear so often from our clients, "I just was going into a restaurant and I was told I have to eat outside because I have a dog," and this is a [inaudible 00:09:12], right?

Theresa Stern: Right.

Christine Benni...: [inaudible 00:09:13].

Theresa Stern: No, we're not doing in Chicago. No.

Christine Benni...: In Chicago, right? And access on airplanes. It goes on and on. So, this is something that we are working on in connection with our clients. How can we, one, help our clients advocate for themselves more, and how can we also advocate for our clients? How can we help the world to better understand what our clients' rights are, help dispel these concerns around legitimate service dogs? So, I would say that's probably one of our biggest challenges. It also challenges the viability or sustainability of our mission, because I've got clients say to me, "I love traveling with a guide dog. That's my preferred method, but I don't know if I'm going to get another guide dog because it's so hard sometimes."

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah. It's like here's this amazing service that all of those of us who are blind and don't drive have been dying to have, and then, boom, here comes the obstacle. It's like one step forward, two steps back.

Christine Benni...: Right.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Christine Benni...: Right.

Theresa Stern: It's a big one. It's a big one.

Christine Benni...: It's a big one. This is also going to be a big one for us in 2025, and this is also an area of critical focus for us in what more can we do, how can we collaborate with other guide dog schools so we have a bigger voice, and really start to break down some of those barriers.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, no, I think that's great. I love the idea of collaborating with other people who are having the same problem, gives us a bigger voice. With all these new technologies coming out, I think having guide dogs, I really applaud Guide Dogs for the Blind for trying to be on the forefront as things are being developed, so that our clients aren't left behind. Thank you for doing that, on behalf of me and all the other guide dog users out there.

Wow. Well, I hear, a little bird has told me, or maybe a little Labrador, that there might be a big announcement coming out this year for 2025. Do you want to tell us a little bit about something maybe happening maybe up in Oregon?

Christine Benni...: Oh, I love it. I would love it. We're so excited. Yes. We are going to be building a brand new student residence up in Oregon.

Theresa Stern: Yay.

Christine Benni...: Yay.

Theresa Stern: Round of applause. Round of applause. Drum roll. Yes.

Christine Benni...: It is going to be a completely new concept of student residence. I'm sort of teasing this.

Theresa Stern: Do tell. Do tell. I want to know all about it. Yes.

Christine Benni...: It has been designed in conjunction with our clients. So through a series of focus groups, this new residence has been designed with our clients, not to our clients, and we're super excited about it. I think one of the critical features of this new residence is that it will be a residence that... We call it our Student Residence and Community Hub.

Theresa Stern: Oh, I love that.

Christine Benni...: The reason we say that is because it really embraces all of our constituents. That was something we heard loud and clear from our clients, is that we don't want to be separated on the campus. We really want to be a part of all of Guide Dogs. So in this student residence, which is also exciting, it is universally designed.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Great.

Christine Benni...: It'll be accessible to everyone-

Theresa Stern: I love it.

Christine Benni...: ... which is really exciting. But it will include our clients, our staff, our volunteers, and our puppy raisers.

Theresa Stern: Wonderful.

Christine Benni...: The entire GDB community will be part of this facility and using this facility, and it's the first of its kind anywhere in the world, so we're exciting. We're excited.

Theresa Stern: Yes. Yes. Very cool. Very cool. Yeah. This is a huge project, I'm sure. Are there challenges with that? I'm sure we're going to do maybe some fundraising for this project.

Christine Benni...: Yes, yes. Where are we right now? We are finishing up sort of the last details of the design, but we anticipate being able to break ground this year, probably sometime between summer and fall.

Theresa Stern: Really?

Christine Benni...: Which is exciting.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Christine Benni...: We've raised 15 million to date.

Theresa Stern: You have?

Christine Benni...: We have.

Theresa Stern: Fantastic.

Christine Benni...: The facility will cost somewhere between 25 and 30 million, so we still have a ways to go, but we've raised a substantial portion of that. So, super excited. Just really super excited.

Theresa Stern: Yes, yes. Chris, I think everybody's going to be super excited about the new Oregon campus project. Can you tell us where we can go to find more information?

Christine Benni...: Absolutely. It's on our website at guidedogs.com/Oregon-campaign.

Theresa Stern: Perfect. Thank you. Any other things you're excited about for 2025 that we can hear about today?

Christine Benni...: Well, we are continuing on our path. We'll be serving more clients in 2025 than we did in 2024. That's exciting. And as more and more dogs are coming out of our puppy-raising homes, of course, our clients are seeing our wait times start to drop, which is-

Theresa Stern: That's amazing.

Christine Benni...: ... really good. Which is really, really, really good in that standpoint, which we're grateful for. We're also seeing a real expansion in our orientation mobility immersion program.

Theresa Stern: Oh, good.

Christine Benni...: What's exciting about that... I gave you a lot of credit, Theresa. That was your brainchild. You started that program and that program-

Theresa Stern: Well, a lot of help from a lot of people on that, but yes, I love that program.

Christine Benni...: Well, we all love that program. And because of the lack of certified orientation mobility specialists in the world, we started a scholarship program for our own staff to become certified orientation mobility specialists. What's exciting is that in this past year, we have three of our own staff who've gotten that certification.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Christine Benni...: We're expanding the number of people who can teach orientation mobility classes in addition to our partners, so we'll be able to be taking on more and more-

Theresa Stern: That's fantastic news.

Christine Benni...: ... [inaudible 00:17:20] which is exciting.

Theresa Stern: Yes. So needed. So needed. Yes. Wow. How about K9 buddies? How's that going?

Christine Benni...: K9 buddies are doing great. We have expanded the K9 Buddy program to adult K9 buddies.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Yes. I love it.

Christine Benni...: What's been really interesting with that program is that we have more adult applicants than we do child applicants.

Theresa Stern: Is that right?

Christine Benni...: yes.

Theresa Stern: Oh my goodness.

Christine Benni...: It is a very, very popular program.

Theresa Stern: I love that.

Christine Benni...: Very popular.

Theresa Stern: Yes. Great.

Christine Benni...: Which actually leads to a few of the challenges that we were facing in 2025 as well, in addition to access barriers. It's dog transportation.

Theresa Stern: Oh, of course.

Christine Benni...: Certainly, guide dogs, a certified service dog can travel in cabin, but puppies, retired guides, K9 buddies cannot. So, we are looking for solutions, good solutions for our dogs. We don't want to just put them in the hold of a plane.

Theresa Stern: No, no, yeah.

Christine Benni...: Trying to get them to where they need to go. So, I'm going to put a little commercial out here is if anybody has a plane, if anybody is interested in helping us in dog transportation, we're really looking for volunteers who can help fly our dogs that are not yet considered certified service dogs to where they need to go.

Theresa Stern: Wow. What a great way for someone to help out and what a fun-

Christine Benni...: Oh, absolutely.

Theresa Stern: What a fun thing to do. Have a flight of puppies. They're definitely probably easier to deal with than humans on an airplane.

Christine Benni...: They're definitely a lot more cuddly.

Theresa Stern: They're more cuddly and cute. So yes, if you have an airplane, please let us know.

Christine Benni...: Yes.

Theresa Stern: Access. That would be amazing. I love it. How else can folks help out or get involved over 2025? Maybe some of us have resolutions to become more involved in the community and to give back. What are some suggestions of ways that we can help guide dogs for the blind?

Christine Benni...: Absolutely. We are always, always looking for puppy raisers, and what a wonderful experience raising a puppy is. And the changes that have been made to our puppy raising program now, we have a multitude of models, so there's clearly the club model, but not everybody has to be part of a club in order to raise a puppy. We've really tried to tailor the program to meet people's individual needs. Also with the changes in the program, which is really focused more on building relationship with your puppy as opposed to just strictly your puppy learning commands, it's a lot of fun. It's a lot of... A big part of puppy raising is what's called adventure walks.

Theresa Stern: Oh, I love that.

Christine Benni...: How fun is that? Foster volunteering. Oh my gosh. Our foster volunteers are gold. Absolutely gold.

Theresa Stern: Yes, they are.

Christine Benni...: We're always in need of foster volunteers, and foster volunteers do a variety of things. They not only take into their home those dogs that perhaps have had a medical procedure and need rest and recuperation, but they're also helping with dogs that have come back to campus or in the training program but are just not thriving in our kennels. Foster volunteers who drop the training dog off in the morning, pick a training dog up-

Theresa Stern: Dropping them off at work and then coming. I love it.

Christine Benni...: Yes, exactly. Exactly. And then, you have this really well-trained, really fun dog for the weekend.

Theresa Stern: Nice.

Christine Benni...: So, there's lots of different foster volunteering options.

Theresa Stern: Great. Great. Awesome. Well, Chris, I'm excited for 2025. This is going to be a big year.

Christine Benni...: It's going to be a very big year, and I'm excited as well. Again, a big shout-out and a big thank you to our entire community, because, again, we can't do what we do without everyone's support. So, many, many, many thanks to everyone.

Theresa Stern: Well, many, many, many thanks to you and your leadership for really bringing Guide Dogs to become the amazing organization that it is. Really, world leader, and for helping so many of us who are living with vision loss, so thank you so much, Chris. And thank you-

Christine Benni...: Thank you, Theresa.

Theresa Stern: And send a thank you to all of your team.

Christine Benni...: Will do. Will do. Thank you.

Theresa Stern: Thank you.

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