Ethan: Thanks for tuning in to Central Bark. This is Ethan, a puppy raiser for Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm currently raising Jersey in the Kent, Washington Puppy Club. Thank you for tuning in.

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

Hello everyone and welcome to Central Bark. Today we have an awesome episode for you. I am being joined by Dr. Belo Miguel Cipriani and his guide dog, Limo. You got to love the name Limo. That's an amazing guide dog name. Belo is a digital inclusion strategist, author, and a teacher. And today he's going to tell us about his work that he does to make this world more inclusive, as well as let us know why he chose the guide dog lifestyle. So welcome, Belo.

Belo: Hello. Hello. Thanks for having me.

Theresa: Absolutely. So Belo, tell us a little bit about yourself and how you became part of the GDB family.

Belo: That's a long, long answer here, so let me break it up.

Theresa: Sounds good.

Belo: I lost my sight back in 2007 and I was living in San Francisco at the time and, because I lost my sight as an adult, I was taking these daily living skills courses where they teach you how to add braille labels and that stuff. And I remember very clearly that this guy walked in and he had a guide dog and he just walked in very quickly and moved around and just zipped in and zipped out. And I was just in awe with how he was able to move around the tables and get something really fast and leave. And at that time, it was taking me, it felt like, 30 minutes just to get across the room. You know?

Theresa: Yes, I do.

Belo: Being newly blind, and that was my first glimpse into what a guide dog can do for someone. There was many more instances where I saw people out and about in public, and it was just amazing how quickly they moved. I have always been a quick walker. I was one of those people when I worked in Silicon Valley, you often do your lunch walks with your friends, your colleagues, and nobody wanted to walk with me because they said I made them hyperventilate because I was walking too fast.

So I felt that when I lost my sight, I lost my ability to walk at the pace I was comfortable in who I've always been. And so that was always in the back of my head. It's like, "How do I get this back? Will I ever be able to get this back?" And it wasn't until I took, I don't know what these are called, I know Guide Dogs for the Blind has a lot of these immersion days where you could work with the dog for one day.

Theresa: Yes, yes, yes. Guide dog experience day.

Belo: Yeah, those exactly. So I remember I was taking classes at the Orientation Center for the Blind in Albany, California, and we had a group field trip and that's what sealed the deal for me.

Theresa: Oh, that's so awesome. I didn't know that.

Belo: Yeah, I spent a day with one dog. I still remember that dog's name.

Theresa: Oh, no way.

Belo: I do. It was just so memorable for me and I was just like, "Okay." I knew this was a high priority, but it went from being high priority to the number one thing on my list.

Theresa: Oh my goodness. And you've had what, three guide dogs over the years? Is that right?

Belo: Yeah, three guides.

Theresa: Yeah. Yeah. So you're in it for life.

Belo: I am. And it just goes by so quickly now when I meet people and they say, "You're on your third guide, wow." And I'm thinking, "Yeah, that is a lot."

Theresa: I know Belo, I'm on my fourth and I can't possibly be that old, but I am. So tell me about Limo. I just love saying that, Limo. You get to go in your limo everywhere.

Belo: I think that's one of the best guide dog names ever. I'm obviously biased, but I love the name. It's not just easy to say, but also it's quite the conversation starter with people. Every guide has come into my life at a very specific moment. And my first guide, Max, was very bubbly, and I think that was the perfect dog for me in my 20s. You know?

Theresa: Yeah, no, totally. Yeah.

Belo: And now I'm middle-aged and Limo is just very regal and very professional and focused and calm. And with my business, I do a lot of conferences and webinars and he's always there and people don't notice him, and he's very stoic.

Theresa: Aw, sweet. Well, and I'm going to correct you. You're not in your middle age, you are in your prime, fellow. You're in your prime.

Belo: I love that. I'm going to write that down.

Theresa: So you've brought up about your business. Tell us a little bit about Oleb.

Belo: Yeah, Oleb Media is a digital accessibility firm, and we've changed a little bit how we work in the last six years that we've been around. We started off as strictly being an audit company where people just hired us to just audit their websites.

Theresa: Including Guide Dogs for the Blind, by the way.

Belo: Yeah, we got to work on the GDB website, which was a lot of fun. So nice to work with people who want to be inclusive and want to do their best work at being accessible.

Theresa: So you did that and then now you're doing some... I know teaching is in your background. You taught for a little while at Yale. Tell me a little bit about your new platform.

Belo: Yeah, so before the pandemic, people were just either asking us to audit or just fix things for them. The technical term for that is remediate. So they would just say, "Can you remediate these PDFs, our websites?" And so on. And during the pandemic, there was this big need for people who just wanted to learn to do this themselves. And so we jumped on Zoom and I would jump on Zoom and do a lot of trainings with clients on how to do different aspects of accessibility. And that then changed the request for people. Our clients were saying, "Okay, well, we love being with you on Zoom, but we want to be able to take these courses at our own pace and bring more people." And so then we started working our online academy. We're doing courses and we're also going to be releasing a lot of guides, and then we're going to be doing more... We're offering different ways for people to engage with us. I guess in summary, we're really focusing on not just doing the audit and remediation, we'll continue to do that, but also offering a training component.

Theresa: Yeah, and I think that's so important. And I think that all of us, we hear the word accessibility, we hear the word digital inclusion, what does it mean to you, Belo, if something is truly inclusive or accessible?

Belo: Let me take a look at that from two perspectives. So for me, as somebody who's an accessibility scholar, I got my doctorate on accessibility and who does this compliance testing. For me, accessibility is meeting a rubric. If you meet these guidelines, you're accessible. And for me, what that means is just meeting the rubrics, and sometimes you have to look at what are these rubrics? Sometimes they're guidelines for an industry, sometimes they're policy or law. Here in the United States, sometimes people look at the 508 compliance. What does that mean?

And so, accessibility is just really meeting a rubric, whatever that might mean for the organization. Digital inclusion is going beyond meeting these rubrics. Okay, so the law says we need this, we need this, but we have these people who also need these other things that are not covered by the policy because it was written 10 years ago.

Theresa: Right. Right. Right.

Belo: And so inclusion, digital inclusion, the digital inclusion mindset is really going beyond what policy asks to make things more accessible to people, more inclusive. An example of that is most policy regarding accessibility talk about just providing an accessible PDF. For someone for example, who may not have a smartphone, who may have limited access to a computer, a PDF may be not feasible to use. So you may provide them with a Word document or be able to print something out or allow them to call in and fill out an application over the phone with somebody, just offering those other touch points because they may not have access for whatever reason.

Theresa: Well, and I think being a blind person myself, I always think about accessibility for people who are visually impaired, but I know that your group looks at all different types of disabilities and things like that, making sure that things are accessible. Can you talk about some of the other ways that you make things inclusive to all people?

Belo: Yeah, so I have my own unique model when I look at the disability community. And so, prior to me launching my own business, I was actually doing accessibility testing, and I landed that job by default. I was working for different tech companies, and I was the only disabled person sometimes in the entire company. And anything that was ADA, they would just talk to me and throw it on my lap, but you figured it out. And it was through that that I realized how narrow my perspective was from accessibility, where I was just focused on vision and I started really researching the needs of other people. That's what inspired me to go to grad school and really focus on education technology.

And so for me, when I look at what does the disability community look like, I break it up into three groups. I focus into one is the sensory community, that includes blindness, hearing impairment, deaf, blind, colorblind. The second group I look at is the mobility. So maybe someone has arthritis in their hands, maybe someone doesn't have hands, maybe someone has a condition or whatever, mobility. There's a mobility reason why that impacts their ability to interact with a device. And then the third group is neurodivergent. And that encompasses a lot of individuals. And that includes, even myself, I lost my vision from head trauma, so I'm neurodivergent and that affects me in many ways, and I fall under that bracket as well. And so that's my approach to looking at these different communities and what their needs are. And I find that when I teach accessibility to people, that this is an easier approach than having these long checklist of what every single disability needs.

Theresa: Right, right, right, right, right. Right. Right, and you get sort of this wide swath. And the beauty of it, I think, is that when we look at all of these different types of adjustments or things that we can make in how we do things, I think it helps everybody. Wouldn't you say at some point?

Belo: Absolutely. Something that I hear a lot, and I hear it a lot from when I do very general accessibility talks, like when I go to business conferences, for example, a marketing one or general small business conference, I get a lot of people that say, "Love your presentation, thought-provoking, but I don't need any of these things because I don't sell to the disabled. If I had a nickel for every time I've heard that, I'd have a private jet. And always my rebuttal is, "Well, people with disabilities are still people. We get married, we buy homes." And so I think that you may not think you have clients with disabilities, but I'm sure you do. We're the largest minority. You're just not aware.

Theresa: Yeah. Yeah, I forget what the actual numbers are, but it's a huge amount of people who really can be considered in the disability category. And through life, we may experience different challenges too. So yeah, I think that's great that you're opening people's eyes to that fact, because I think you're right, people love to categorize and be like, "Okay, yeah, nope, we don't have that." No, you do. You don't know who has, like you said, arthritis, or someday you may break your ankle, and wouldn't it be great if these things were accessible or whatever. So that's great. That's great. So what's going on with your writing career? I remember when I first met you, Belo, writing was really your passion. Are you still taking to the pen?

Belo: I'm still writing. I just had a book released last month.

Theresa: Oh, congratulations. Tell us about it.

Belo: The book is called Managing Digital Inclusion, and it's just an ebook. People could get it from their online retailers, and it's actually free right now on some of the platforms, all but Amazon. Amazon does not allow free books anymore. So I could not offer it for free on that platform. It's 99 cents. That's the lowest I could bring it, but it's free-

Theresa: Certainly a great deal, yeah.

Belo: Yeah, it's free everywhere else. And so that book is really... It's a case study, and it's really looking at giving people an idea of what we talked about. What is accessibility? What is inclusion? What commitment do you want to make? And where could you start? And I used the case study of this business owner who is breathe diversity, breathe inclusion, very beautiful story. This guy was so motivating for me as an entrepreneur, but even though he had this passion for inclusion, when it came to digital accessibility, he was not even meeting the basics. And so it really dives deep into that. So highly technical, but I'm also doing other projects. I am working on a graphic memoir.

Theresa: Oh, you are? Tell me about that. How does that work?

Belo: I know.

Theresa: So cool.

Belo: So what happened was back in 2021, I was contacted by the Center on Literature in Germany.

Theresa: Really?

Belo: And they flew me out there, and I spent some time in a castle in Germany.

Theresa: Oh my gosh, how amazing.

Belo: It was amazing. And they hired me to write an essay for them and translate it into German. I would say that outside the US, the country where my memoir sold the best was Germany.

Theresa: Really? Okay.

Belo: Which was so unexpected for me.

Theresa: Yeah, right? Who knew?

Belo: And so I was in Germany, and I was at this literary festival, and I remember that I was with these other four publishers, independent publishers, and they were doing a round robin like, "What are you publishing? What are you doing these days?" And graphic memoirs are really popular right now. That's the trend right now. And they're walking around and they're all asking each other, "What graphic memoirs are you doing?" And then when they got to me, they said, "Belo, what graphic memoirs are you doing?" And then someone jumped in and said, "That is such a rude thing to ask him. He could never do a graphic memoir because he's blind."

Theresa: What?

Belo: And I sat there and I got quiet because I just didn't know how to answer that. It bothered me. But then I realized, "Why does it bother me?" And it wasn't until the next morning when I woke up and I realized he made a decision for me. That's what really did it. And I can do a graphic memoir. I came back to Minneapolis and I contacted my friend who's an illustrator. I said, "Hey, I have this essay and can we turn it into a graphic memoir?" And we started working together and we have the drawings and we're in production, and it's happening.

Theresa: Amazing. Yes.

Belo: Yeah, and I do a lot of talks to disability groups, and I'm always telling them, "It is your own story. You're the protagonist of your own story. Don't let other people write your story." But that's an example of even me, with my experience, I'm still ending up in those situations where people are making choices for me.

Theresa: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I've always felt like the thing that makes being visually impaired probably the most difficult is other people's opinions of what you can and can't do. So I love the way that that whole story illustrated that. I think it's so important. Yeah, don't let people tell you what you're able to do. That's great. So Belo, tell us what's next for Oleb Media?

Belo: We are going to be launching a new website in a couple of weeks, and I'm excited about it because we're going to be launching our online fully self-paced academy, so people could buy classes online from us and work with us no matter where they are in the world, no matter what level of accessibility, or no matter what their goals are, they could work with us through our courses and through our guides and through our coaching sessions. And so we're really excited about being able to offer this training and making it available globally.

Theresa: That's amazing. How would people contact you if they wanted to get more information?

Belo: They could go to olebmedia.com and sign up for our newsletter. That's really the best way.

Theresa: That's O-L-E-B, right? O-L-

Belo: Yeah.

Theresa: Okay. O-L-E-B.com and sign up for the newsletter. So how about for fun? I remember you used to be into the Brazilian Martial Arts, [inaudible 00:18:45], I can't say it. How do you say that?

Belo: Capoeira.

Theresa: Yeah. Are you still doing that?

Belo: I was pretty active up until maybe five years ago. I started getting a lot of injuries. I did a back flip and I was just out and I didn't land properly. And I remember at that time going to the doctor, and the doctor just said, he said, "Belo, you're 40 years old. I don't know any 40 year old who's doing back flips and doing this kind of stuff. I'm not telling you what to do, but you want to slow down." And so I started doing more yoga. I've always loved yoga, but I started doing more yoga, and I started doing a lot of what they call sound healing, playing instruments, and doing reiki. And so I feel like I'm doing more of that these days. I still sometimes take a class in Capoeira here and there, but I feel like it's become a smaller part of my life and I'm really doing, I guess, what I'm calling more of the passive.

Theresa: Yeah. Yes, good for your body and your soul. Yes.

Belo: Absolutely.

Theresa: Yeah. Great. Great. All right. Well, I just can't wait to have you back on again because you're always doing something new. But I really want to say thank you so much for joining us today, and thank you so much for the work that you're doing. It really makes a better life, selfishly for me, but for the entire world. And you're really an example of how one person can really make a difference in so many people's lives. So thank you so much, Belo.

Belo: Thank you for having me.

Ching: Thanks for tuning into Central Bark. This is Ching, a puppy raising volunteer for Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm currently raising Guava in the San Jose Puppy Club. I'd like to send a special message to my leaders, Kathy and Karen, for supporting me throughout this journey. My favorite thing about volunteering with Guide Dogs for the Blind is the puppies and the people.

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