Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Teresa Stern, and I'm your host. Hello everyone and welcome to Central Bark. I am so excited about today's episode. Today we have a very special guest. His name is Joe Stretchay, and Joe is a TV and film producer. He's also an enthusiastic advocate for inclusion in the entertainment industry and a disability employment expert as well as an expert in TV production. He's pretty darn amazing, so super glad to welcome you here today, Joe. Thank you for joining us on Central Bark.

Joe Strechay: I truly appreciate you all having me on. Central Bark is an awesome name. Every time I hear it I smile.

Theresa: I know, I wish I could take credit for that. I'm going to do a shout-out to Morry Angell who came up with that, one of our Guide Dogs for the Blind marketing team amazing members. So yeah, it's a good one. It's a good one. So Joe, tell us a little bit about what you do for a career, or more likely what it is you don't do for a career. It sounds like you have a pretty amazing setup going on. Tell us a little bit about it.

Joe: I'm a producer and consultant around television and film. I do also do some public speaking and schools and with non-profits, events and corporations. As a producer and consultant, I'm totally blind. My graduate work is all around blindness from Florida State University and I specialized in teaching children who are blind or visually impaired orientation mobility, so teaching them how to travel and specialty in transition. But in the production side at my undergrad is around communications and media. So I mix both worlds and I work on programs or projects that involve disability or blindness and making sure the script's authentic to the story and the character. And then also casting process. I do a lot of different things working on set and such. Yeah.

Theresa: Wow. So you're the go-to guy for people with disabilities or people that are doing movies and TV shows that include people who have a disability. Would that be true?

Joe: Yeah, I would say so, especially around blindness. Most of my work's been in that realm, but I've done cross-disability as well, and I definitely have a good track record in that realm.

Theresa: Awesome. I'm so jealous. That sounds like an amazing career. Great stuff to do. And shout out to Florida State. They have a great program in rehab for blind folks, and we need more people to take up that torch there.

Joe: We do.

Theresa: Yeah.

Joe: We have definitely a shortage across the country in all those fields around blindness, so yeah.

Theresa: For sure. So we first met you, Joe, when you were working as a producer on All the Light We Cannot See that starred one of our family members, one of our GDB alumna, Aria Mia Loberti. So tell us a little bit about your work on that film and what that was like for you.

Joe: It was such a pleasure to work on All the light We Cannot See. It actually started back in pre-Covid, like 2020. I think February 2020 they reached out. They got my name from three different sources' thing I'm the person to reach out to, so that helps. And so I got to work with [inaudible 00:03:37]-

Theresa: We're just going to call you Go to Joe. Go to Joe.

Joe: That's a good name. I'll take that.

Theresa: There you go.

Joe: I got to work as they developed out the scripts. Steven Knight was writing the episodes who created the show See, and I got to work with him on See and the creation of the show, and my role just grew on that. But on All The Light, I got to work with Sean Levy, who's executive producer and director of all the episodes, and Dan Levine as they were really figuring out what they were going to do and got to help with the casting process as we first cast Nell Sutton, who's a legally blind low vision and now actually lost some more vision, but out of the Whales. She's now I think 10. She just turned 10 crazy.

Theresa: She was amazing.

Joe: Oh, she's adorable. She lights up the screen and she's just infectious to be around and love her and her family. But we cast her first and we continued a international search for both parts. And we found Aria later on and through a couple rounds, and she was actually came through a orientation mobility instructor, referred her to the audition. It was a self-tape and we did it. We had casting teams on every continent, and I was working with them on that whole process. And Aria had never auditioned. She did a self-tape for us, and it was clear from her first audition that she had something special and really connected with that character.

And Sean was like, "I think we have something special here", because we had tons of other auditions, thousands of people who are blind or low vision from around the world auditioning. And part of my work was to help make that happen, but also the process and then also figuring out if people are actually blind or low vision because when you have a role this level, everyone said they were blind or low vision, even if they just wore glasses or contacts.

Theresa: I take off my glasses and it's hard to see. I would imagine.

Joe: Totally. Yeah.

Theresa: You'd have to do some vetting for sure. But hats off to, was it Netflix who decided to actually cast blind actors in these roles?

Joe: Oh, Sean-

Theresa: That's been such a struggle.

Joe: Yeah, I would say it was Sean Levy who made that decision, and he is deserving and he wanted to see what was out there and what was possible. And luckily enough we found Aria who was the perfect fit.

Theresa: That's awesome. That's awesome. So when you were working in any of these productions, I know that you have a visual impairment, obviously you said you're totally blind. How does that work for you in making sure that if you're on set, that the actors are being authentic about how they're portraying someone with a visual impairment?

Joe: So on set, and it started on See, really using someone, a choreographer who helps audio describe every take on screen, who are watching the monitors and they're describing it, but beforehand, we do a lot of work to go through every scene and look at every action in the scene to figure out what we're looking for. I determine whether we're looking at familiar setting, like a place they've been before and how they're finding items or objects. And if they have been there before then it's familiar. So that's different than unfamiliar.

Theresa: Totally different.

Joe: Yeah. So this person audio describes every take. They go through what I'm looking for in the beginning, and then as we go on, I am asking more questions, even little things. I think the first day Aria was filming, we were watching and it was my first day giving feedback on filming for Sean Levy and team, and we were doing the opening scene of the show and we're going through all the things, I'm checking off. And then I asked one question and I'm like, "When Aria, or Marie-Laure, is walking towards the broken window, does it look like she's stepping on glass because there's supposed to be glass on the floor there and what are her steps look like?" Because I didn't hear anything coming through my contact, which is earphones. Oh, you listen to the sound. And I'm like, I wonder if there's anything on the ground. And they're like, "No, it looks like she's just walking to the window." And I'm like, "Yeah, that doesn't make sense."

Theresa: No, it doesn't.

Joe: And I go up to Sean and I'm like, "This is not a blindness thing. This is a continuity, kind of a little detail. I was just wondering about her steps. She's supposed to be stepping on glass-

Theresa: Right. We don't hear it.

Joe: And it doesn't seem like that." And Dawn's like, "So how do you want her to walk?" I'm like, "Well, like she's stepping on glass." And he's like, "How's that?" I'm like, "You can figure that out. That's not my expertise." So through a few minutes of him discussing with his folks the first ad and others, they're like, "Oh, they got fake glass to put on the ground so that when she's stepping, it gave her something factual to step on and to react to." And I think that helped us figure out this is Aria's first time on set that she's very kinesthetic, wants to experience things, touch things, move, and she comes with a lot of energy and it's those little details that help sell the story.

Theresa: Well, and I love that, but just having your perspective on you brought a different perspective than maybe a sighted person would bring to that. So it really shows the enormous value of inclusion in all things we do because we all have a different perspective to bring, and that made that a more authentic scene, whether her character was blind or sighted. So that's awesome. Good for you.

Joe: Thank you.

Theresa: Very cool.

Joe: It was a lot of fun. Yeah.

Theresa: Joe, tell us a little bit about what it was like to work with Aria. We love her here at Guide Dogs for the Blind. Tell us a little bit about your experience with her.

Joe: So Aria Mia Loberti is probably one of the smartest people I've ever met in my life. For example, I was the first one to meet with her in person before filming and everything. I traveled to State College, Pennsylvania, I took a bus there. Glamorous Life it is.

Theresa: Yes.

Joe: And went and talked through things, but she ended up getting the scripts. We got her the scripts while I was there, and then a week or two later, we were doing a read through two episodes one day and two episodes the next day. So Aria being the amazing genius she is, she memorized all four episodes and not just her lines, all the lines so that she could know when to speak and not speak-

Theresa: What? Oh my goodness.

Joe: For all four episodes.

Theresa: Wow.

Joe: So she's not just some random person and she's a beautiful, intelligent, passionate person that's really trying to push to make impact and she found the gift that she's supposed to be using. She is meant to be an actor and she's going to have a long career in our world, and I believe in her tremendously, and it was just a pleasure to collaborate and work with Aria on All The Light We Cannot See.

Theresa: Wow, that's amazing. Yeah, she's a stellar, stellar human being for sure. So Joe, I know you're passionate as I am, about audio description, which makes it accessible for those with low vision to really know what's going on screen. Can you tell us a little bit about audio description and about the acceptance of audio description and the prevalence?

Joe: Yeah, that's a great question. I'm really passionate about audio description. I access all my television and film with audio description. I've been obsessed with TV and film my whole life. I worked at a video store in high school, VHS tapes, like Netflix for the young folks, but a building you go in and there's shelves and tapes, and if they're not on the shelf, you can't watch it. So a little different than Netflix, but audio description gives me access and it gives people who are blind or low vision access as well.

I'm finding a higher prevalence for sure. We're not where actioning is and it's not fully required by the FCC, like captioning. It's a percentage of hours, but a lot of the streaming services jumped on board early before it was even required by them. So Netflix was the first with the show, Marvel's Daredevil back in 2014 or so, or 15.

Theresa: Wow.

Joe: Netflix continued, all their produced content was audio described. Then Disney plus, Apple TV plus describes every show in many languages and provides many languages, the captions obviously. I really think it's an exciting time around audio description. And the American Council of the Blind has an award show called the ACB Audio Description Awards Gala. Every year they recognize networks and shows that have high quality audio description, and I think that's what we're looking for now is higher quality audio description.

And it's so cool that live events are starting to be audio described like at the Oscars and Grammys and also some of the audio describers, the narrators and folks are people who are blind or low vision, which I think makes total sense. It's just about the most exciting time and I think we're being fully included or places are trying to fully include us. We're not there yet and we run into issues. You look at the commercials during the Super Bowl and commercials aren't typically audio described. That also is leaving us out in some way. There are cool commercials that we don't understand. We have to get descriptions from other people. We still have a long way to go.

Theresa: Yeah. Well, what I think is interesting is I know a lot of people who are not necessarily hard of hearing are using closed captioning, just have it on all the time because it can add to it. People learn in different ways. And I know my husband who's sighted, he likes audio description because he sometimes misses some of the things that are going on. So I think again, it's a nod to Universal Design. We may think it's for a very smaller group of population or whatever, but actually I think it can help a lot of people. So thanks for doing that. Is there anything that we can do, the audience can do to help promote audio description?

Joe: I think it's voicing your opinion on social media and to the different streaming networks or networks when content is an audio described. Voice your opinion. It matters, and let the FCC know you want more audio description as well so they can build stronger and higher requirements. Yeah, I think that's exciting. And you're right, that universal design, actually more people with sight watch or listen to audio description on Netflix than people who are blind or low vision because they're listening in the car, they're listening to TV shows versus watching them. And I think the more that universal design happens, the more inclusive and more prevalent audio description becomes.

Theresa: Very cool. And I know with your background that you've done a lot of work just in terms of employment for people with visual impairments. Can you tell us a little bit about your passion for career development?

Joe: Yeah, pretty much my whole postgraduate work was around employment related services and orientation, mobility to people, training people. And I always put an emphasis on employment. I was working for a VR training center and I was building in employment lessons into orientation and mobility lessons-

Theresa: Great. Yes.

Joe: Because I felt like every service should be focused on the end result. And really the end result, besides independence, is getting people to work in that realm. Now, if they had a job, that would be something different. Then I worked in all kinds of areas, but transition services, I created curriculum around that and helped create programs like college preparation and vocational preparation programs in different states and got to write curriculum on that and create jobs and opportunities and work with companies and businesses as well on that inclusion. I had vast experience working with companies and businesses to make sure that the process is accessible, making sure that when they're looking to include people that it's accessible, but also the atmosphere is inclusive.

Theresa: Right. That's so huge. Yeah.

Joe: And building relationships.

Theresa: Can you talk a little bit more about that, about that difference between accessible and inclusive? I think that's a really important piece.

Joe: Yeah. Inclusion, I think if an environment's not accessible, it's not truly inclusive, but people don't talk about that much. Your atmosphere can be inclusive, your hiring practice can be inclusive, but if it's not accessible, then they're not going to be successful in the job. If we're not allowing people access and truly to do the work, how are they going to continue to do that work? How are they going to stay employed? It's one thing to hire someone, it's another thing to retain them and keep them and support them, but also allow them to succeed and hopefully move on to a higher level positions.

Theresa: Right. That's awesome. Great. So talking a little bit about you now, a little more personal. I know people who are listening to our Central Bark, we talk a lot about guide dogs. We're obviously Guide Dogs for the Blind, and I think people think that we feel all blind people should use a guide dog, which is just not at all true. And I think we're really dedicated to wanting people to have the skills and the tools that they need to be independent and to live the lives that they want to live. And I'm just wondering, I know that you travel with a white cane and that's your way of getting around the world. I certainly do that some of the time too and some of the time with the dog. But tell us a little bit how the white cane is really the perfect tool for your lifestyle.

Joe: I'm pro whatever tool makes you independent and allows you to travel the world. I think both have pluses and minuses, guide dogs and the white cane. My white cane allows me... I don't have to bring dog food or I also travel a lot and often, very early in the morning, late at night, long days, I work on sets sometimes like See for three seasons, Dystopia show about a viral apocalypse. We had lots of animals, like tons of animals. We had dogs, we had horses, we had sheep, goats, bear, a bear, we had [inaudible 00:18:41]-

Theresa: You had a bear? I have to watch this show.

Joe: And some of my work involves interacting with those folks with those animals too.

Theresa: Yes. Of course.

Joe: And I'm not saying you couldn't do it with a guide dog at all, but there are definitely some situations that might be a little harder. And some of the sets I was climbing and bouldering, and often the characters I've helped to work with and develop and shows are cane users. It's sometimes tougher. I wonder if there are any orientation mobility instructors who use a guide dog?

Theresa: Yeah.

Joe: There are?

Theresa: Yeah, I think there probably are, but yeah, actually I know a couple, but it's pretty rare. Yeah.

Joe: So out teaching folks to travel and stuff, so bringing that as well to my work, just for me, it works better at this moment. And truthfully, I came home from working in Europe thinking that I want to get a guide dog and I might get a guide dog down the line, probably from Guide Dogs for the Blind. They're like one of the top brands for sure, around guide dogs. Just for my life and work, and we also, my wife and I have a pet dog whose an-

Theresa: What kind of dog?

Joe: Australian Shepherd.

Theresa: Oh, do you? Oh my gosh.

Joe: She's deaf actually. So we use adapted sign language to communicate with her. She's sweet and loving and stubborn too. She'll turn her head away when you're doing signs to, and I have to feel her head to see if she's looking at my hands.

Theresa: It's like talk to the tail.

Joe: Yeah. She's like, I don't want to listen to you, buddy.

Theresa: I love it. I love it. Yes. No, I think that's so important. People figure that out that sometimes a dog is the right choice at one point, and sometimes a cane is the right choice. And sometimes like me, it's a little bit of both. So thanks for letting our listeners understand how important that is to have that choice, right.

Joe: And to be pro a guide dog. I've worked with lots of folks who use guide dogs, and it's a much faster motive as you're moving. Typically, you move faster than a cane traveler typically. And also you avoid obstacles without having to find those obstacles. There are huge pluses to guide dogs, no doubt.

Theresa: Well, except for the one which is the 4:00 AM I'm hungry wake up call from the dog. You don't get that from the canes.

Joe: No, you don't.

Theresa: Oh my gosh. Wow. So what's next for you, Joe? Anything in the hopper you can talk about or?

Joe: I'm working on a couple independent films, like small films, helping to build inclusion, but also around authenticity, around the scripts as they develop it. And I've worked on a couple animation projects as well that'll be coming down the line. One is more of an independent feature film. The other one is a larger one. We'll see what happens. It's been a fun ride. I'm loving every minute of it, but I hope to create my own shows. That's really my goal. I continue to write and eventually I'm going to shop my scripts around. For now, I'm loving helping other people create their vision or what they want I make and make it reach our audience, like people who are blind or low vision. Yeah, authentic to that story.

Theresa: That's great. Well, I want to thank you so much for the work that you're doing. It's so important to me personally, and I think to everybody who's visually impaired, that as a visually impaired person we're portrayed accurately and that we have the opportunity to actually act in those roles. I mean, that was certainly not something that I ever thought about as a kid growing up blind because it was always sighted actors playing the blind people or whatever. And so I want to thank you so much for your commitment and really showing the world how amazing people with visual impairments are. So thank you so much for that, Joe.

Joe: Oh, I feel bless. On See we got to bring on 35 or 36 actors who are blind or low vision over three seasons and over 20 of them were recurring role, so multiple episodes for each, and we brought on hundreds of background performers who are blind or low vision, but we didn't stop at blindness or low vision. We also brought on folks with other disabilities-

Theresa: Love it.

Joe: Because if you're going to do that, you need to be really inclusive and try to bring that world alive in that realm and not always define the story around it though, so yeah.

Theresa: Right. I love it. I love it. I love it. So are you open to people contacting you if they have interest in what you're doing? And if so, how could they reach you?

Joe: They can find me on my, I have a website. It's Stretchay Consulting and Stretchay is S-T-R-E-C-H-A-Y Consulting. It's a .org. And I have a social media. I'm on Instagram, I believe it's Joe Stretchay, so J-O-E-S-T-R-E-C-H-A-Y. I'm on, well, X. I was going to say Twitter, but I'm on X at I think J. Stretchay. I'm on Facebook, I'm on LinkedIn as well as Joe Stretchay. Yeah, you can reach out. I'm excited and thank you for all the work you guys do to help connect people to guide dogs, but also make them more independent and allow them to travel and be independent in their life and work. It's so important.

Theresa: Great. Thank you. Thank you so much for joining us today, Joe. Really appreciate it. Super interesting stuff.

Joe: Thanks you.

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