Theresa: 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 have a really interesting topic that we're going to discuss. I am joined today by James Dress, our manager of dog placement programs at Guide Dogs for the Blind, and he is going to tell us a little bit about those programs that he oversees and what it really means to be career changed for one of our dogs at GDB. Welcome, James.

James Thank you, Theresa. It's great to be here and always love talking about dog placement, so appreciate the opportunity to educate folks about what we do.

Theresa: So James, tell us a little bit about your background and a little bit about what you do at Guide Dogs for the Blind.

James: I am the dog placement manager and that oversees the Department of Dog Placement and Foster Care, and we'll get into some of those details as the program goes on, I'm sure. I've been here for about eight years.

Theresa: Wow! Already? Oh my God!

James: I know. It's coming up in I think May I'll be here eight years.

Theresa: Wow! Congratulations! Wow!

James: Thank you. And before I came to Guide Dogs, I did a number of things. I was a marine mammal trainer in a few places. I got into dog training. I saw how training pet dogs could really help the owners who were working with them, and that led me to think about how I could use those dog training skills to help people on a broader scale. And so about 25 years ago, I moved out from the East Coast and worked for Canine Companions for Independence and became a service dog trainer there to train dogs for people with disabilities other than blindness.

And I really enjoyed that. As we know, the dogs are an important part of it, but really the mission is all about the people and being able to work with clients. And I found I really enjoyed that. I had a brief stint working in shelters after that, doing dog behavior, dog training classes, and then really missed the combination, the unique combination of people and clients and supporting them and using those dog training skills to support the clients. So when I saw this role opened up, it felt like a perfect fit for my background, and I think it has been so far.

I've really enjoyed the role and the staff here. And I can talk a little bit about what the dog placement department does if you'd like now if that's a good time.

Theresa: That would be great, and thanks for sharing about your background because I think we are so lucky at Guide Dogs for the Blind to have someone like you running this program who has so much experience with lots of animals. We don't do a lot of dolphin placements.

James: Not too many.

Theresa: Not too many, but the dog background and, like you said, that client fit program, which I think is so important because we are really all about service. So yeah, tell us a little bit about our dog placement program at Guide Dogs for the Blind. I know I'm always asked, so what happens to the dogs that maybe don't choose to become a guide dog or a K9 Buddy?

James: Great question, and we get that one a lot too. Dog placement basically means that we're in this department in charge of placing any of the dogs that aren't selected as a guide dog, as a K9 Buddy, or is a breeder. Those are called career change dogs. And it's a phrase that sounds funny to people at first sometimes and other organizations use different terms. They'll say release dogs, things like that. But I love the phrase career change because I think it's really descriptive.

And the example I like to use is it's all about finding the right fit for each dog. It's a matching process. It's one thing that Guide Dogs across the board does really well with their dogs and clients or adopters or breeder custodians. We're very good at making that match. And so I like to use the example of how many people do you know that have only had one job in their life and that first job they had was the best fit and they did that the rest of their life?

It's not very realistic in many cases. So career change is about recognizing that while the dogs weren't selected or didn't have the right set of skills or temperament, perhaps to become a guide dog or a K9 Buddy or a breeder, they can really excel in other roles. And so for any career change dog, the first thing we do is look at their ability to do another kind of working role.

That means we have a number of partners, about 10 community placement partner organizations that we work with, and they train dogs for different types of service work, including hearing dog work, diabetic alert, the PTSD service dogs, mobility service dogs, all across the board. So one of the cool things we get to do in this department is get to know each dog that is career changed and figure out where their best fit is. So it could be one of those roles.

Theresa: I love it because in an earlier episode this year, we were talking about how we're looking at each... Just like we look at each person individually, we're looking at each dog individually and where they are going to excel and be happiest. And so it was funny when you're talking, I'm thinking you're like the career counselor in high school.

James: That's great. That's a really great analogy. I love that. I think there's a lot of truth to that too. And we're not forcing the dogs into any role, right? We're looking at, like you said, it's important that they're happy and they're motivated and they're enjoying the work and they're bonded with their client. And I'll give you an example of a type of dog that might be a great fit for a community placement partner organization. So sometimes we have GDB dogs here who are very enthusiastic.

They've got a lot of energy. They're really wiggly. They're food motivated. They may be a little bit independent, and maybe that doesn't work exactly so well to become a guide dog. Maybe they start on that path and maybe they're just a little bit too distracted by something out in the world, or they're too excited to see another dog or another person. Well, that kind of dog could be a great hearing dog to go to a partner organization like Dogs For Better Lives, one of our partners up in Oregon.

And they're trained to assist folks who are either deaf or hard of hearing and alert them to sounds, important sounds like fire alarms, phone call, oven timer, those types of things. And if you think about that, that dog has to have some energy and be self-motivated because it could be 3:00 AM and that dog could be sound asleep and the client is sound asleep and the fire alarm goes off and the client doesn't hear it.

So that dog has to spring up, come over and use their paw or their nose to keep alerting the client until they wake up. So that energy and that persistence and enthusiasm can be channeled into that a working role and the dogs that do that kind of work love that. So that's a great example.

Theresa: It's funny because the only time my guide dog does that, is that persistent is when it's time to get it up and feed him.

James: Well, the food motivation definitely helps.

Theresa: No, I love it. Yeah, you want a dog that's alert to be working with a person that has a hearing impairment. That's fantastic. I love it. I love it. The service dog industry has really grown in the years that I've been involved with GDB and there's so many different types of services that we find that dogs can really excel at and different programs. How do you decide which programs are somebody that we would feel comfortable partnering with?

James: That's an important piece of the puzzle for sure. There are a lot of service dog organizations out there. Some have been more established than others. Some are smaller. So we have a thorough vetting process that we go through and an application process for any organization that's interested in participating in the community partner program.

And that'll start with a thorough application and some forms that they need to submit, goes into all kinds of in-depth questions about the number of dogs they have, the way they train the dogs, what the facility is like, what the support they give their clients is after they're placed. And we're really at this point looking for, again, it's about finding a good match.

So we want to ensure that any organization that we're going to partner with share similar approaches to training, care of dogs, selection of clients, et cetera. We want them to have the same standards as Guide Dogs or perhaps even better, but Guide Dog standards are pretty high, so I think that would be a challenge. So often we're looking for similar standards.

So that starts with an application. We'll have a phone call to talk to the director of training there. We do a site visit. And in fact, we've got one coming up I think this week, a potential new partner. So we'll do a site visit. We'll spend time watching them train dogs, the staff training dogs on site. We'll look at the kennel facilities if they have any. We'll ask about vet care, et cetera.

And then if everything looks good at that point, we have a pretty in-depth conversation to learn more about the types of dogs that they're looking for and the types of roles that they train them to do and what types of dogs would work for that, what types of dogs would not. And really look at it as our goal is to build a relationship with this partner and have this back and forth so that we can send them dogs that will be successful in the program.

And the nice thing is, I don't know what the exact rate is, but the percentage of our career change dogs that go to organizations and are successful is something probably between 90-95%.

Theresa: Is that right? You are a good career counselor, James. That's fantastic. I love that.

James: And Theresa, that's awesome because even though the dog that we raised and bred didn't go on to become a guide dog or a breeder or a K9 Buddy, we feel that this is still an opportunity for those dogs to give back to the community and be able to assist someone who needs it. Personally in the department, we feel that's a success for that dog and makes a difference for that client just like it would for a guide dog client just in a different venue.

Theresa: And they're in the venue that's most suited to their needs and their skills. And so that's fantastic. I love it. People are always asking, so we've got dogs then that become K9 buddies or they become breeders or guide dogs that maybe get a special placement through one of your partner programs. What about dogs that are kind of like maybe their aptitude is to be an amazing pet? How does that work?

James: So you're correct in that we're going to find the right fit for each dog, and sometimes that means that the dog just wants to be a pet, or that's the best fit for that dog. And that's great. So what we will do at that point is we'll evaluate the dogs to see if they have potential for one of these other types of roles that we've been talking about. And if not, then they get offered back to the puppy raisers that have spent a year and a half and all this love and time investing in these pups. And so they get the opportunity to adopt the dogs back first.

And then if not for whatever reason, it could be that those folks have already adopted three dogs from us and they're going to continue raising, we are very, very lucky here to have a number of applications from the public for our career change dog program. So we will go through those applications and find the best fit for each dog. A little bit different maybe than the way a shelter would work, is that because we are so committed to our dogs and we are lucky to have a lot of great applicants apply, we will really get to know that dog's individual needs.

Every dog that doesn't make it, that is career changed is going to have some little behavioral or maybe a minor medical issue that prevents them from being a guide dog. So we'll look at those needs that the dog has and try to find the best fit from amongst the applications we have, the best home. What kind of a home environment does this dog need? If a dog might be a little sensitive to noise or traffic, then we've got our Oregon campus and a lot of adopters up there have a more rural lifestyle.

So it might be that the dog doesn't live in a city and isn't exposed to those things on the daily basis. They can live a comfortable life out in the country somewhere. So we are really looking for adopters that have some skills with dogs that are willing to meet the dog's needs, whether they be behavioral and continue training or medical and ensure that they get the right vet care. And we're very lucky to be able to do that.

On average, I would say where we are now, we have about a hundred dogs a year that we place as pets between both campuses, and we will get anywhere from about 1,000 to 1,500 applications a year for those dogs.

Theresa: That's a big difference, and I think that's important for people to understand that we're so lucky that we have dogs that we can find to place with me there through our programs or through our partner programs, but they're all so good, we don't have that many extra.

James: Yeah, and it's changed over the years. A big positive change recently that you might've already spoken about on the podcast is the K9 Buddy program expansion. And so we have more dogs going to visually impaired or blind children or adults, and those dogs have really nice temperaments and they're getting selected for that first, which leaves less dogs down the line, which is actually a good thing.

If you're looking to adopt a GDB dog, it not be the best news in the world. But from our end, we're really happy when as many of these dogs as possible can go on to some kind of a working role. And that's been happening more over the years. So we're happy to hear that.

Theresa: That's a great success to tout. So tell me then a little bit about another program that you oversee that somebody who might be interested in having a dog and maybe doesn't want to have a dog all the time or whatever, that could really help our programs here at Guide Dogs for the Blind, and that would be our foster care program. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

James: Sure, I'd love to. I'm very passionate about the foster care program. That was one of the things that drew me to this role at Guide Dogs because they had such a robust foster care program. So foster care, I think probably the listeners can't imagine what foster care entails. It's any dog that needs a break from the kennel for any reason. They could be recovering from a spay or neuter surgery. We might need to do a little evaluation in the home for them.

That's popular with the K9 Buddy dogs. We like to get them into homes with children sometimes for a couple of weeks and see how the dog does in a home environment. There can be a behavioral need that we want to suss out, and it's easier to do that in a loving home environment. So one of the cool things about our foster care program too is our commuter program.

Theresa: Oh, tell us about that. That sounds cool.

James: This was really exciting to me when I came here, Theresa, because this was a program that didn't exist at some of the other places I'd worked, and I thought it was such a brilliant idea. So it's the equivalent of dropping the kids off at school for the day. So you've got the dog in your home and you come in the morning, you drop the commuter dog off. That dog works with guide dog instructors for the day. At the end of the day, you pick up the dog. You take them home. You feed them.

You get to hang out. You get to love the dog. Follow the guidelines. Do their homework. Make sure they're in bed by 9:00 for their big day. They're on the weekends or they're on the holidays, et cetera. And what that has really done is helped more dogs be successful. It means that they don't have to be in the guide dog environment on campus if that's not the best fit or if there's another option for them. And so those commuters are really, really awesome volunteers. And those folks usually live fairly close to one of the two campuses so they can transport the dogs back and forth easily.

That is one of my favorite things about the foster care program. And as I said, that's something that is fairly unique to Guide Dogs for the Blind. I didn't see that at other organizations, and I thought that was just such a brilliant way to have more of our dogs go onto these roles where they can assist people. So that's a big part of it.

Theresa: As a guide dog handler, it's nice to know that they're sussing out some more... I mean, they do it at the puppy home too, but sussing out some more of their home behaviors and things like that. It's just great. I love it.

James: And we have traditional foster care too. So one of the nice things about foster care, and I think you mentioned this, Theresa, is that it's good if you don't want to commit to having a dog, but like having a dog in the home sometimes, it gives those foster care providers flexibility. So they can take a dog for... Sometimes the stints are as short as a weekend. Sometimes they can extend longer for medical dogs or dogs that are awaiting their next step. But we match the dogs to the foster care providers and look at their schedules.

And so it's an opportunity to still be involved with Guide Dogs, care for a dog or maybe multiple dogs over time. We have a lot of folks that have done foster care for many years and have fostered sometimes hundreds of dogs. But then you still have the flexibility. You don't have to worry about if you're going on vacation. We've got some foster care providers that will go to Hawaii for a month and they don't have to worry about finding somewhere for their dog for that time.

So it allows you to still be involved and get your dog fix, but not have to deal with some of the more challenging parts of dog ownership.

Theresa: Absolutely, and you're making such a difference. So if people are interested in the foster care opportunity, how would they get a hold of you and raise their hand?

James: Well, guidedogs.com, our website, lists the volunteer opportunities, and there's a section if you go to volunteering that is specifically for foster care and it will outline the different opportunities that I mentioned, the commuter foster, what we call traditional foster care, and then the K9 Buddy program, which is really awesome because we're looking for homes with kids. It's sometimes a way for kids five and up to be directly involved with these dogs. We want the kids to interact with them, give them commands.

We want the dogs to get comfortable and see, again, how they do in a home environment. So that's a really exciting opportunity for families that might want to get involved, maybe don't want a dog of their own. And as you mentioned, this information that we get having the dogs be in this kind of a loving home and the information we get from that is invaluable to ultimately helping the dogs end up where they need to be.

Theresa: I know somebody will probably ask, if they have a pet dog at home already, are they still eligible to be a foster care?

James: Yes. Sometimes we are looking for dog free homes, but we also love people that have had experience with larger breeds before. And a lot of times if people have had experience with larger breeds, they have a dog at home. We know our dogs really well that we're sending out. We know if they're going to be okay with other dogs. You know our guide dogs are very sweet overall with other dogs. So we just give people management tools and tell them how to introduce the dogs.

And we use confinement techniques, a crate or a tie down, things like that, to help the dog transition to a new home, to set them all up for success. So yep, that is absolutely not a deal breaker. And I would say more than half of our foster care homes, and we have I would say between both campuses, we probably have over 200 foster care volunteers currently, and more than half of those have other dogs in the home.

Theresa: And you need some more though, correct, right?

James: We always need more. Yes. The biggest needs are probably the commuter fosters who are closer to campus. The cool thing there is you're helping directly with the training dogs that are actively in the program.

Theresa: You're helping shape them really.

James: Yeah, exactly. You're literally directly contributing to their success as a guide dog and get to be a part of that process, get to see them graduate on campus in person or online through our streaming service. So the commuter foster care providers are always needed. And we're also looking for K9 Buddy homes, families that would be willing to take a dog typically for two weeks for an in-home evaluation, and they get a little form to fill out about how the dog did. We ask them to take some videos of the dog in the home with the kids interacting with the children.

So that's a really fun opportunity as well. And then of course, we always love if folks want to do traditional foster care and work with some of the other dogs on their own timeframe, whatever works for them. But I would say commuter and K9 Buddy are always our biggest needs. And we'd love if anyone out there that hears this is either interested themselves or knows of anyone, any other families or individuals that might be interested in doing this, please feel free to send them to guidedogs.com.

And that's a great source of information and also an initial application that they can fill out, and then the team will get back to them to follow up with next steps.

Theresa: James, I want to thank you so much for joining us today and for the work that you're doing at Guide Dogs. It means so much to me that the dogs that come through Guide Dogs for the Blind are really treated with so much respect that we're looking for a way that they can really thrive in the environment that we end up placing them in. And I really appreciate the work that you do to ensure that that happens. So thank you so much.

James: Well, thank you, Theresa. It's been a pleasure talking to you and see you again. And just I have to give a shout-out to the great team here, the three staff members here and one up in Oregon who run the dog placement foster department. They're just wonderful. Everyone cares about the dogs, care about the people, and they're all very skilled at making those matches. So I really appreciate my staff and all the staff here at GDB pulling in the same direction towards our mission.

Theresa: I love it. I love it. Thank you so much.

James: Thank you, Theresa.

Theresa: Thank you for tuning into Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. If you enjoyed today's broadcast, please hop on over to Apple Podcasts and leave us a five star review. Your reviews help more people find our podcasts and learn about GDB's life-changing mission. We also love it when you leave us notes.

As always, if you have an idea for an episode or a question you'd like us to answer on our podcast, please send us an email at podcast@guidedogs.com. We love hearing from you. Head over to guidedogs.com/podcasts where you can find recordings of previous episodes along with show notes and transcripts.