SPED 510 Podcasts Episode 10: Jen Armbruster

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Amy: Hey Jen can you hear me?

Jen: Yes.

Amy: Hey. Well, I want to welcome everybody today to our special Orientation Mobility Podcast, O&M on the Go. We have a very special guest here today who is a faculty member at Portland State University, and is also a Paralympic Gold Medalist Athlete. Her name is Jen Armbruster and she's going to be talking with us today about the importance of physical fitness, but also what she's learned along the way about being active, being out there, and having high expectations. Which I think is a really critical topic for all Orientation and Mobility Specialists wannabes who are listening today.

Jen has a lot to share with us. Welcome Jen, and please share a little bit about yourself, where you're from, and how you got into the work that you're doing now.

Jen: Sure, a little bit of background I guess: I was a military brat growing up. I grew up overseas a lot of my life. We had been stationed back in Colorado Springs. I was 14 when I started losing my vision in my right eye first, and then the left eye about three months later. Just a guess was either a viral infection and/or a radiation exposure. We were overseas in Barcelona. Then I was stable for about three years. I had lost my central vision, and I had periphery out of my left eye. When I was 17, in about four hours I went total. It was right before my senior year of high school. That was my background as far the vision impairment and blindness. I was an athlete growing up my entire life. College basketball was supposed to my ticket, but like I said, I lost my vision at 14. I still played competitive varsity basketball until the day I went total, before my senior year. While I was there I was actually introduced to the sport of goal ball right around January, February right before I turned 15. I was actually introduced to the sport, and so when I went total I was actually on the U.S. team already - actually heading to Barcelona in '92 for my first round of the games. So, a little bit of, I guess, about my history of my vision and also sort of my sporting career.

Undergrad work was done at the University of Northern Colorado. My graduate studies were done actually at Sam Houston State University down in Texas. And I've been working in sports administration for almost 20 years I guess. Adaptive sports for probably over that informally, and my degrees of course are in criminal justice so go figure. But I've been an athlete and working with folks with disabilities for 20 plus years.

Amy: It is really an incredible honor to speak with you and a real bonus that you work at Portland State University now, after having had all of these world experiences, leadership experiences, sports experiences, personally and professionally giving back to the community.

Tell us a little bit about how orientation and mobility may have played into your journey. The folks that are listening in, may or may not have experiences with adaptive sports, but there are so many principles that relate to health that relate to orientation and mobility. Can you reflect a little bit on that in your journey?
Jen: Absolutely, I'll probably go on the professional journey first and then on my personal life. Professionally, one of my ... After my graduate degree I actually worked at Western Michigan University for about four years on a part of education on a grant sports education camps specifically for visually impaired kids around the country. Western Michigan had been running a sport education camp since 1988. I wanted to expand model to a national one, so we could the start those camps around the country. A lot of our camps that we ran, we pulled in the vision teachers and orientation and mobility specialists from the school district in to there because the importance of a physical education.

Many other kids get pulled out of the P.E. classes or they get exempted from P.E. classes or they're on the sidelines. It was an opportunity for us to educate the division teachers and O&M instructors on the importance of physical education for the rest of their lives. It's just as important as reading writing and arithmetic will be.

It’s great if you can do all those things only to die of a heart attack at 40 that's not so great. The obesity rates for children and adults with visual impairment is higher than a lot of folks. We just want to get folks active and starting at an earlier age, but then also adults as well. Just getting them active and engaged in their community. We used to rec and sports as that model, but the bigger key really was the success that we heard from kids and adults later on, that are doing sports or recreation.

It's something that they were told not to do whether from a parent. It was from a school administrator, it was because they were getting pulled out of P.E class, their own peers, whatever that might be breaking through those barriers. They were able to break through some other barriers in life as well.

Those ones that said “oh, you're not going to be successful in college” or “you're not going to be successful in your job” or anything. What we learn in sports or recreation, just like anybody sited would, there's so many more valuable lessons to be learned.

The team was the community, the communication, time management that helps in college, in life, in family, in jobs. That was the focus that I had there on the professional part of it. My personal journey is that Orientation and Mobility was with huge for me. I went through two different stages, obviously, without some vision to being total and so the skills that I used changed a little bit. I am a dog guide user. I've been for 20 plus years.

I was one of the youngest at the time to go to C9 when I was 17, but I was already on the team. I was travelling around the country by myself and my orientation and mobility was huge for me. My orientation and mobility instructor was with me to help with the college routes, to help with navigating my high school, in the vision loss the first time.

Again, I was already an athlete, so that that helped some. It's huge I guess again, from a physical demand of we're not driving cars anytime soon. We're walking, you need to be in physical activity hopefully to be able to walk those routes and public transportation is great in a lot of places but it's faster for me to walk with my dog half the time when the
bus is running late. I'd rather walk those two miles than wait for 20-30 minutes for another bus because I can walk it quicker. Being in physical health to be able to do some of those challenges and those demands on your body is I think key for, again, independence in not having to wait for the next bus, wait for Uber, wait for a friend, wait for whatever the things are. It just gives you even a little bit more independence and a little bit more physical capability to be able to walk longer and faster and get around. It was a key part for me for sure I would say. Work and life circumstances change, and my dog and I are averaging easy three to six miles a day, and more on some days, because it was quicker for us to walk and get around town than other transportation.

Amy: Very cool, and the reflections Jen that you're sharing on just being an athlete first, coming to that the strength, natural strength that you have in your own body, your sense of competition, your sense of participation in sports and working with the team. You came to orientation and mobility naturally later and you brought all of that with you. I love what you said about kids and adults who may, all of us are struggling more with obesity in the country. Then in particular people with vision loss or people with combined vision and hearing loss are more at risk for that because of that confidence factor and knowing what to do. In your experience in working with kids or adults who aren't naturally athletic. They're not naturally, maybe they never thought, they never heard that they could play sports. They never thought of themselves in that way. What have you learned along the way about helping people that were not athletes first that sort of came into this knowledge of themselves later?

Jen: Yeah, I think it's not. A lot of them got their start with O&M, just being outside for the first time and walking those routes. That first step sometimes is getting out of the house and having the confidence to go down one block, two blocks, half a mile, a mile.

Then having the confidence to go out to the park and engage with the kids. Taking the kids to the museum, doing different things that, maybe again, that lack of confidence held them back. So starting them... Yeah, sometimes the O&M is just getting them out walking is the first step to that active lifestyle. Then the orientation and mobility piece is maybe you do go to that local community center or the YMCA, and it is orientation and mobility in a different setting. To learn those pieces and learn machines or learn, again, a lot of it is just the fear of the unknown which sighted or not that's a common fear for folks that don't see themselves as athletic or recreational. That is to an extent the barrier I guess with the vision loss of the, I don't know where that machine is or where the treadmill is or how it operates because I can't see it or read the instructions. I think it's where O&M comes into play of, hey, why is the gym or your community center or an outside park not as important as a grocery store, the bank and some of the other routes that we choose to teach folks, or ease them into like you said, a banker or a grocery store. Understanding that physical activity might, that barrier, might simply just be the unknown just like the bank or the barrier or that. They're starting almost just the orientation mobility piece of getting into that space of, can I even navigate the space comfortably or get them to the point where they can: the locker rooms, different floors and just the layout of maybe that community center or that YMCA. So I think that's key. I think again, and it's baby steps just like we do in anything that we're learning for the
first time. As that confidence grows then you're going to I would say maybe reveal yourself.

We don't all have to be athletes or [inaudible 00:11:25] just being active and just engaging. Talk about engaging with a team, community, your family, right. Who doesn't want to engage with their kids, or their partners or the friend? And things like that. Or even the social aspect, you’re at work. Even to understand the orientation of what a baseball field looks like or basketball court to me is huge. When they're having a conversation about the Trailblazers and somebody gets a three-pointer, they have these concepts.

Those are concepts I think that we sometimes, we don't think about teaching when we're there. It might not be that you’re going to be this basketball player, or that you even have a desire to play basketball, but let's be able to have maybe a conversation about baseball or basketball, and not just not understand it because I don't play it - that is not important.

Amy: Absolutely essential, during the World Cup that was a few years back I saw this video of this gentleman who happened to be deafblind. He was in Brazil, and his friends were watching the game and he was watching the game with them. One person was positioned behind him and was actually using their fingers on his back to like show the position of where the person was running the ball forward. In front of him both of his hands were on tactile model of the soccer field.

His other friend was showing him from that position where the team was advancing the ball. I think you hit on something really powerful and you're an international traveler, Jen. You've been in Barcelona and I'm sure other places in the world.

I love what you said about sport being more than just about even the physical activity being able to have a conversation or share an experience with people to share that knowledge, to share a conversation with others. Would you reflect on maybe what you've learned about the power of sports for people in general and then people with visual impairment around the world?

Jen: Yeah, you said it. I think sports we talk together about the Olympic games or the winter games. I think sport brings folks around, from around the world. Again, you’re at the element level or whatever you’re there to win obviously, but it's also you're there to make those friendships, you’re there to, I guess the political isn't supposed to be there right? You’re just there to compete and we're race or ethnicity or background.

That stuff doesn't matter you’re just there to step on to the playing field, have sportsmanship, have team work, give everything you have. And when you’re done, and given what you have, now it's time to look from the score board at the end of the day. If you can look yourself in the mirror and say, “Hey, I gave everything I had, that's all I can do.” You're going to shake hands and move on from that, and hopefully develop those friendships.
I think sports transcends, I guess the war, the political differences, or I think it should. Today's world it's not the same as it used to be. I think there are a lot of athletes out there in a lot of countries that that is their time to put those differences aside - the difference of who they are and part of who they are in the culture thing. I think it's different in the States versus European, or Brazil which is a great example. Brazil culturally talked about soccer, it's huge! And so whether you're a visitor or you're not, that is part of the Brazilian culture, is soccer. There is nobody down there that doesn't know these top players down there and I think you've grown up with it, you know it. And sometimes is a little bit different in the States because we are professional athletes. It's a little bit different where no matter what your status is, soccer in Brazil you're playing it - whether that's with a ball of yarn, with a high level soccer ball, with some rags you tape together. You're playing a form of soccer, because that's what you do. Adaptive soccer is no different, they have it for chairs, they have it for visual impaired, they have it for everything, because that's part of their culture. I think as for sports again, depending on certain sports, also on that cultural piece and the social piece of it, it's huge. And I think like here in the States a lot of ours revolves around professional athletes and I don't think that's the only place that extends.

I think assuming you look at other countries and from around the world sports is a common language, even if we don't speak the same language. We can connect on a level with whatever sport that is that you're passionate about. Again, or your country is passionate about whether it's soccer, that's badminton, it's table tennis, it's football, it's whatever that might be lacrosse, rugby, you make those connections, either within your country, within your state, within your city, within your town.

It might be pickle ball or whatever - it's popular somewhere and they're building that community. Then you see that the folks with disabilities are going to see that. Let me use an example, when we started sports education camps around the country, salsa dancing, when I had my Arizona one, they were like “can we do salsa dancing? It's really big culturally here.” Sure! It's movement, whatever! It's not my first pick but hey, that is a cultural thing and then it was huge down there. It was very successful for the group of kids and adults that we had down there. It was awesome to see, because culturally that was that was big. In certain places cycling was a huge thing. Sailing, with our Wisconsin family going sailing was a huge thing. That's what those kids knew and I that's what was in their back yards and things like that.

I think that it is huge to be counted culturally to what your audience is, and how do we get them involved with their interests, their families’ interests or just even the regional. Obviously here in Oregon, you know, Northwest Washington area the outdoors is huge. It's easy to connect. The O&Ms need to - why not take him out on trails? Why not learn those navigation pieces? Then you're in the city of Portland and O&M is a little bit different than up in the gorge and up on Mt. Hood. I think those experiences are just as important so that is part of that orientation and mobility piece.

Amy: I love this conversation and I love what you're sharing about the ecology and the culture right around people. Just to share, what other reflections have you learned from people that you've worked with? Maybe what would you say to families who may be feeling very protective of their kids or very unsure that they can participate in sports?
They may not have ever really imagined that for their kids. They may still be grieving whether it’s a part of being a human being. They had to change their expectations about their journey with their child. How would you encourage those families?

Jen: Yeah, sometimes my approach isn’t always the best, but coming from someone with vision impairment and blind, I had great parents that, when I only had partial vision with my peripheral in my left eye, were okay with Wilson being snapped on the side of my head while my teammates were able to bounce back faster or whatever. I think having those true conversations and listening to parents and to the kids or the adult that have those fears of, okay, what are your fears? What do you think the barriers are?

Then there’s actual I perceived barriers out there. Let’s get those out there and let’s take them one by one. Is it the administrators are saying, “Oh, my gosh, John is going to get hurt”? Okay, well, then guess what, I’m going to try the same things for Johnny that I did for Susie who’s sighted, and I swear I’m still not going to sue you, because Johnny is going to bleed. Johnny’s bleeding will stop just like Susie’s did it’s okay.

Sports and recreation in of itself has an inherent risk. People blow out their ACLs, they break their arms, they have concussions. They have that whether you have vision or not. That happens in sport so that is already here inherent in sports. Young little Johnny or Susie that doesn’t a vision or doesn't have the greatest vision, what is it that we can do? What are the decisions can we make that maybe it can help Johnny or Susie be successful.

Those expectations for Johnny and Susie are still, if they’re going to swim at the same time, or they're going to be able to still contribute something on the basketball team, or the football team, or whatever that sport is. Having those conversations with both the parents and the child on what it is that you need to be to be successful or give you that shot at things, but then like I said, reassuring those parents that I swear the broken bones will heal the blood will stop. Those happen. At the school, I play volleyball we have concussions. That's a real thing, obviously. Just like in any sport 15 years ago there was tons of concussions going on just like there are now. It’s just more diagnosed. Now are we more on board with it? Absolutely. Just like you're seeing football coaches more on board, hockey coaches, basketball you’re seeing, so absolutely there's, I think people think people are getting more injured now than they used to be but I don't think that’s the case. I think we're just more aware.

Amy: More aware of what's going on.

Jen: More aware of what to reach. Absolutely, which we should be regardless of disability not disability but that's just it is what it is. Equipment is getting better and better to protect both children and adults from some of those injuries and at the end of the day, I mean, even if you go to the orthopedic they’re doing how many ACL surgeries?

They’re doing shoulder reconstruction. I mean, that is part of moving forward and recreation and just because you’re visually blind we’re going to be exempt from injuries.
I said that the busted noses and broken fingers and dislocated things, those happen in all sports.

Amy: You're not giving moms a lot of... if there are moms here today you... I'm partially teasing you but I think you're perspective as an athlete, as a leader who is blind-

Jen: And a mom.

Amy: And a teacher and a mom all of those things right. Go ahead.

Jen: I talk the talk, but to say that I don't, every time he goes up there... He was catching last week for the first time. The first one hit him on the face mask I'm like, [inaudible at 00:22:12]. It's not that I don't cringe when he gets hit. I'm like, “Okay, that'll probably smart a little.” That's part of sport and he's going to get hurt. He's probably given it's not probably matter of if, it's probably more a matter of when, because you want to go out there and do stuff which is awesome.

But yeah, as a parent it's definitely, I think it's one of the hardest jobs that we have to do is kind of step back and go “let them.” We all take those risks and then look back even in our own childhood and yeah, we learned from those risks and we did some things we probably shouldn't have done and things, but that was part of the growing up experience. For sure so we're talking about sport recreation is much more controlled setting. You have the protections that are in place as much as you can. You have rules of the game, you have things to protect the kids and adults as much as possible, but injuries will happen. Whether that's an acute injury that happens on the spot, or it's a chronic one from just wear and tear just like any other sport or recreation or all these runners – there are tons of runners out here at the Northwest. There is tons of chronic issues. Yeah, that would be I guess my advice.

Amy: It's good advice Jen and I love the layers to it open in your many roles that you shared. In your camps when you were setting up your camps through Western Michigan, throughout the country, your involvement in Arizona. Did you ever involve parents in some of those camps or maybe in getting to know what their children could do?

Jen: Yeah, we did a lot of education. We did education with therapy. We did a lot of education with the athletes. We ran an active course model, so we taught the kids to navigate for themselves on how to throw in the basketball in class, and they really want to play. What are some of the things that I would need? I'm light sensitive. Why don't I just put sunglasses on and that takes the glare off. I can wear my baseball cap, you know. What are different things... I could take my cane and whack the back of the hoop and play HORSE maybe, instead of five-on-five full court. There are some other things we can do to make those skills happen for that sport, and talking to the kid on what their goals were and how to achieve them.

Especially nationally, we talk to parents or offer the opportunity, either during the drop-off piece or the pickup, for about an hour and a half for them usually with me and/or one of my sport education camp counselors that we hired that was visually impaired. He
was fortunate enough to talk to parents for that reason, and have an open honest dialogue on what helps them or what your fears, and let the parents let those fears out. Let us talk through some of those things or even, maybe it's not that the parents that have the fear but it's an administration or the society. Yeah, let's give you some resources on how do we fight that administration or, “Oh, my kid came back from sports camp and now they're way into judo and I know nothing about judo.” And try to hook them into some other mentors around the country, or somebody maybe closer to them. Or hey, judo is not my sport. Hey, I know this other person who is a fan of judo they'd be glad to talk to you. Or talk to the sensei at the dojo on how to work with a child, because a lot of it, again, is fear based. I think we'll probably get an outside the first time. Sometimes it's not oh, my gosh we don't want to it, it's we don't know what to do therefore we're just going to do it.

It's just knocking down some of those barriers and it's yes, we brought the parents involved that way almost I think all of ours too, we did a competition at the end and we always invited the parent before pickups so we would have like a competition or goal ball or whatever. It was always open for them to come to any of the competitions. Yeah, they could always watch and things like that, so we got them involved that way, so they got to see little Johnny high jump or Susie play goal ball or whatever that was.

They got to see that at a competitive level and hopefully they did the same thing that a lot of the athletes did was go to that next step and go okay, cool. Little Johnny did that and okay, he's got it. I don't think too many of our kids came back from sport camp without a bruise or two. We made them play all the sports. Their first year they have to try everything, regardless, so there was always going to be a bruise or a cut or scrape. I think it was good for the parents to see that it was okay that little Johnny and Susie came with a bandage or a bruise or whatever.

Amy: It seems like you also through that process had some transformation. You saw some transformation both in the students, maybe even in the counselors who were counseling the kids and teaching them new things and also a transformation in the family.

Jen: Oh, yeah, absolutely, whenever you have a kid come back year after year, huge differences, not just their ability as an athlete or anything, just their confidence grows, their self-esteem. Like I said, you have kids come back and go: “You know, I did this, I'm not an athlete but I still come back to sports camp every year.” And go: “I don't really like getting sweaty and gross!” But I get to talk to somebody else from around the state who also says of his own impairment. I'll use Michigan as an example. They don't have a blind school. Those kids often are the only vision impaired or blind kid in their school district or their thing. For them, just to come around community and be able to talk about like, “I had Algebra too, what did you do for it? What did you do?” And just watching them - that was a huge thing on sports camp. The other was watching them network with each other on how they navigated different situations, whether that was math or English or, “Hey, I have this opportunity to go on an exchange program, my parents don't think I should because I'm blind, I'm 16.” And somebody else would go: “Oh, I went to an exchange program,” or “I have been overseas,” and different things. There was some networking that went on between the kids but also between parents.
They go, “Okay.” Those different opportunities I think happen as well it's not just about the sports and education piece, but they come back the next year and they're like, “I went out for debate club.” Awesome! That’s cool, you know. They often would, we would do a pre-post, they would come back to this, and it was a four day thing. It was just four days, but to watch that transformation happen in four days whether they come back the next year and/or we do follow-up. It's pretty powerful and I don't think you realize how powerful an hour conversation with a parent is until a year, two years, or three years later. And all of a sudden, I had a kid from North Carolina come to the Michigan Camp. I talked to his mom for maybe 30 minutes, 40 minutes one time and then I got to see that one long-jumping in the stadium in Athens you know.

Amy: Amazing.

Jen: This is the mom that was like, “Hey kids, I don't want him to go. What do you mean? I don't want to go to goal ball nationals with you!” She did it, she let him go that first time, but then after that...but that was a barrier for her. It was her kid going by himself somewhere. “I'm gonna send him to this camp in Michigan.” Yeah, it's going to be okay.

Amy: That's amazing, that's an amazing example too of the arc of what these four day experiences, what these camp experiences, bring over a lifetime over a lifetime. In thinking about the orientation and mobility specialist role, I do know that even within these camps there's more of an effort to include orientation and mobility specialist both in the camp, or as a part of the team.

Maybe as a part of some training, we’re really excited this year that some of our students in our program are going to be having more formal experiences as a supervised part of their practicum. What kind of reflections would you give on the role of orientation and mobility students or orientation and mobility specialist within those programs that you described?

Jen: I think take full advantage of that experience that's hands on, and think outside the box. I don't know how much leeway you all have. A different thing maybe will even be like you coming to the thoughts or passions that you have and the recreational hiking or designing those type things. What would be helpful or not helpful? There's some formal processes, and we do that with volunteers too like there's a way to...“Hey, these are some helpful hints that guide somebody.” That's great, but maybe that's not how I want to be guided. I want my hiking and trail access [inaudible at 00:31:21]. So, I think just always having those conversations. The more experience you get with different folks, and hearing about that also triggers some different ideas for you. Then you don't get lost into the “oh, this is the way it can be then therefore if their fully blind, then this is how they should do it.” I'm not a big believer in that there's one size fits all, for anybody, because we are all individual, so we all come from different backgrounds, whether that's us as the O&M instructor coming from a different background, and/or students coming from different backgrounds. They must adjust the different things that come to their mind like put those in your back pocket like it's an idea that may or may not work the next time. It's another idea that maybe you didn't learn formally, so you take all the formal training, but all your contact time that you have with folks... just see how they do it differently or what they do. One of the example that I know – it’s not O&M, it was
more of a life skills thing. It was about falling temper and things like that. I was with a student at sports camp and they were like, it's just they asked about handling something and I was totally blind.

The things were like six goes up. It was just simple as like salt always in the area. It has been through whatever unless that salt had nothing in it and then the school maybe couldn't be same. I was like, "Unless it's a glass charge and the waiter is totally different but those classic ones you got it most restaurants." You can be able to tell the difference but that kid was just never, not one of the things that you're formally taught.

It's just those different things that you'll find when you're out on your lessons and you're with your students and other instructors is, there will be little things that you notice that maybe aren't pointed out to you formally. You get them whole odd, even, north, south, east, west. You get a lot of these basics that aren't going to change. It's the little things that is on a route, or different things that you're like, "Oh, yeah, you think you are in one location."

I was either learning about building lines and things like that, but there are just different things that I think you'll pick up in your practice or that your students will say, "This is what helps me." I think listening to those students is huge. It’s formal training is awesome. It's great and y'all are the experts, but at the end of the day that person often knows what their goals are and what their views are. To me it's just like me working with my dog. I was formally trained how to use my guide dog. My dog is an individual as well. He went through that formal training as well. We'd still do some things that we're still working out together as a team, and we have to listen to each other to figure those things out. I think anytime we're working with students, whether it's a kid or an adult, it's working together and that you are a team so you all can be successful.

Amy: That's really great advice. And you're right it's good life advice about staying open to learning, and listening, and particularly listening to the students, and clients, and anyone that we work with and being a team that's outstanding advice. I have one [crosstalk 00:34:18].

Jen: Even with the balances.

Amy: Yeah.

Jen: You got to challenge them right? You can't just go, "I don't want to do that." That's my goal as I'm coming out of that block. That's awesome, but we've got those goals too right. That's part of the team too right. Expanding, getting out of our comfort zone and getting folks to expand and saying, "our expectations are a little bit higher, a little bit further."

Amy: I've heard you talk about that, Jen. I've heard you talk consistently about having high expectations and what that means to build trust but also to challenge someone maybe outside of their comfort zone that's really important.
Jen: Absolutely, yeah.

Amy: Can you reflect a little bit on technology, on maybe what technology has done in your view for sport and maybe even for orientation and mobility. I hear different people say different things that you need the, you need the sounds in the environment. You need the smells, you need all the regular stress that you have to make good decisions and then some people think, “Oh, technology is the answer, technology is going to solve all your problems.” Can you talk a little bit about that in your view?

Amy: Sure, yeah, I witnessed a lot of technology changes that’s for sure. Like I said, I am a dog user. I was a cane user for all of about four months. I had already applied for a dog not knowing I was going to go total. I had night blindness all the way, so I had applied but I was also 17 so I was denied until I get a little bit older and then I actually went total and they got me in the next class that was available to me. I think, so they knew I was going to be able to use a dog. That’s low technology for me - was going from a cane to a dog, but that was my preference and what I chose. As far as the technology and what y’all were talking about was having more way-finding, and that type thing. That I think it's interesting. I think it's great. I love the fact that I can pull up something if I want to, put it in my GPS and get a lot of great information. I have a couple of different apps on my phone that I use, but I find myself I used it when I first got it a lot. I was like, “Oh, this is so cool.” I rarely ever turn it on now, and go back to my old school north, south, east, west, odd, even set up on a grid. Pretty hard to get lost. I still go back onto that old school. I think technology is great but at the end of the day, technology can fail. I think it's pretty important that folks still know how to navigate their environment without technology in their hands. I think technology is a great tool, it's awesome, but if that's what you're relying on, what happens when your battery dies? What happens when the satellite goes down, or what happens whenever your apps crash, reset or whatever your phone needs? The update on iPhone fails or, then what do you do? I think technology is a great tool and a great enhancement but I think the nuts and bolts of navigation are still, should be there.

I think technology has opened up a lot more things. There’s trails in California that I can pull up that have, it could be on my phone and things like but I still have to have the skills to be able to go back on the trail if I decide to do it by myself or just with my dog. I still have to go back on the skills of safety, whether I’m a cane user or a dog user, and that trust piece. So I think that technology is awesome but I can’t always rely on it. I still ride in city buses the Max stop. I don’t trust the overhead. They’re off all the time but I have spent some time with different things that I’m more learned like all right, well, I know what’s on the train, which side of the train opens up and then when it’s going to switch over I know about that one. So if I’m not paying attention the whole time I say, “Okay, I know where I’m right now.” The curves in the in the train track I know where I am without necessarily tuning in. I often find that the overhead is wrong. It’s just that I think technology it’s been awesome, like I said, it’s great but I feel that sense of timing and those things that we learned, probably the first time we did O&M, was when you walk your pace then you kind of know about how long a block is or you know about how long you’ve walked. Every turn is so internal. I remember when my dog got sick in college, I hadn’t had a cane in my hand in a long time and I don’t necessarily recommended that, but I’m sure all the O&M instructors are like “it's horrible.” You’re
right. It was probably. I tried to walk with my cane to class and I couldn't do it. I ended up folding it up and putting it in my back pocket and walking in my dog's pace because I nailed all my routes, because that was the pace and the timing I was used to.

I just got frustrated with my cane because it was so different with being reactive or being proactive and stuff. It's not something I would say I recommended. It's what I did for three days, was not use my cane, because it threw me off and things like that. Then my friends would be like what are you doing? They'd just give me a ride to class. I was just for me, as I said, it was actually because I didn't have a skill to eventually fall back on because I didn't do it.

Now, if my dog is sick or things like that, I feel much more confident in my cane skills, because I've chose to make sure I incorporate those things. Like I said, that's not even high tech, but your dog is going to get sick or it's got to go to the vet or something is going to happen that will change your world. I was a dog user for 20 years and I've always been able to retire my dogs. I have a situation that I lost my dog suddenly but I made it without one for about three and a half weeks.

It definitely changed my whole, hold on to work, my whole not feeling confident at four in the morning with rainy conditions with my cane like I did with my dog. Then my orientation skills had to change as to my routes and my time of day and it's huge to have all these. I think technology is a great enhancement.

It is great as the times around the city where like I lost track of a street or whatever and I can flip something on that I can find where my coordinates are and I'm like, “Oh, sweet, okay, I'm at Jefferson or whatever. Awesome.” That's been great but I also know that I can also just ask somebody, and go old school. And just go “hey, do you know what that street is? Thanks!” Or have the street number and go from there as well. Yeah, I think technology is great but I don't think it's the end-all be-all to everything because you know it will fail at some point, whether it's a battery life or whatever.

Amy: Exactly, well, I love how you started with no tech when you started with the no tech and low tech devices of the dog and the cane, as integral to all of that experience. I love what you shared about the trail and information about nature trails and incorporating that into sports and recreation technology.

Jen: I have a friend who's actually, she's at the University of Hawaii and she's studying national park systems that have better information for people with disabilities to travel, to access the information in the national park system. Both for navigation and just for point of interest, just information access to more of nature through technology which is interesting.

Jen: It's one of my [inaudible 00:42:06] is a sailor, and he'll navigate in the world by himself. He's totally blind, and he's out there with his boat, with his GPS. And I was like, “That's a huge orientation and mobility undertaking that he went.” He threw on his phone and then was like, “All right, you go.”
Amy: To be in the open ocean.

Jen: He does a lot of solo sailing I think he’s done a lot of it between here and South America and different places, and he’s just ramping up to do it around the world. They have a funding in doing all that type of stuff. It’s a huge orientation and mobility undertaking. He’s going to be tech savvy but he also has to have the old school stuff. He’s got his low tech stuff as well, his backup AM radio. He’s doing everything he’s got. It’s fun to watch him for sure.

Amy: That’s a fantastic example and thank you so much Jen for spending time with our students today who are in Alaska, in Hawaii, all over, Oregon and Washington. Thanks for spending time to talk with us and we appreciate your leadership.

Jen: Okay, yeah, anytime.

Amy: Okay, take care now.

Jen: Have a good rest of the summer.

Amy: Thanks again, take care, bye-bye.

Jen: Bye.