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Podcasts Episode 15: Jake Koch

Jake Koch
Guide Dogs for the Blind

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Jake Koch Interview Transcript Podcast

April 29, 2020

Resources

Links to the resources that Jake Koch talks about during the podcast

- [O and M Resources Page](#)
- [Client Readiness](#)
- [Orientation and Mobility Immersion program](#)

Transcript

Amy Parker ([00:00](#)):

Hi everyone. Welcome to another podcast today. I am so pleased to host Jake Koch from Guide Dogs for the Blind. Jake has been a partner to our new program and has been an impressive educator and ally to our program in preparing orientation and mobility specialist. But I'm going to let Jake tell you a little bit about himself and then we'll get started. Jake, welcome.

Jake Koch ([00:26](#)):

Thanks Amy. Happy to be on the, on the go podcast. This is wonderful and uh, always great working with you and your students as well. Uh, so as Amy mentioned, my name is Jake. Uh, I am visually impaired myself. I was born with a condition called Bi lateral micro ophthalmia and that mouthful of words simply means small and partially undeveloped eyes. Um, basically I see tunnel vision in one eye and a little bit of light perception. And the other, I currently travel with a six year old female black Labrador guide dog. Her name is Forli a she is named after a city in Italy. Uh, so I've been with Guide Dogs for the Blind, um, in the community outreach department for the past seven and a half years. It's been a fantastic journey. That's how I got my start in the field of blindness.

Jake Koch ([01:25](#)):

Um, working at a school for the blind teaching independent living skills to adults. And before that I grew up in a family business. My parents give guided tours of Hell's Canyon by jet boat. Uh, and that's really where my public relations, community outreach marketing, um, education type background started was, was working, um, with my parents, giving tours, customer service, things like that. So I had a pretty early start. In terms, um, that experience my education experience working, um, with people who are blind or visually impaired, um, into a, um, dynamic community outreach role at guide dogs for the blind.

Amy Parker ([02:09](#)):

And you know what, Jake, you are quite good at it. I actually didn't know that, that bit of history about your family business, but that makes, that makes a little bit of sense to me because I've seen you in action. Like you are a wonderful educator and an adult educator and showing, showing people around and making things very relevant, keeping things on pace, you have an innate sense of that. That's really, really cool.

Jake Koch ([02:40](#)):

Oh well thank you. It's definitely a skill that was sort of undiscovered to me, um, that I kind of developed as I've gone along. So that, that's been kind of exciting.

Amy Parker ([02:50](#)):

Sure. Well, tell us about what you have learned along the way. Why did you get into the field of guide dog mobility? What, are you passionate about?

Jake Koch ([03:03](#)):

Good question. Um, so I was one of those kids in school that was, to be frank, afraid of orientation and mobility. I grew up in a small town in Eastern Washington state. Um, my parents live out in the countryside, so it didn't have a lot of experience or a lot of exposure to even the simplest of routes or things like, uh, traffic lights or traffic for that matter using a cane. Um, cause again, I grew up in the countryside, um, and just kind of adapted as I went, uh, if you will. Um, so I, I never really thought I was going to be a great traveler or would enjoy it. Um, and as I started learning orientation and the ability in school, it was kinda like other school lessons like, ah, do I really have to do it? You know, is this really, you know, this isn't me.

Jake Koch ([03:56](#)):

I'll just get a ride everywhere. Cause that's kinda what I was exposed to when you live in a small rural community with no public transit or ways to get around that is your way around is, is, is being driven everywhere, unfortunately. But as I got older, I started to realize, you know what, maybe I'm outgrowing this small little sleepy town in Eastern Washington state. Uh, maybe I do want to do a little bit more with my life. And so orientation mobility became more important to me. When I graduated high school, I moved to Vancouver, Washington. Um, I started at Clark community college and attended a transition program through the Washington state school for the blind. And it was really an opportunity for me to spread my wings. And in doing so, I saw the importance of O&M. So, even though I had decent instruction, but, you know, it was, it wasn't the most advanced, um, skillset I learned very quickly how important having orientation and mobility was.

Jake Koch ([04:57](#)):

After completing the transition program, which is called lift learning independence for today and tomorrow I got a job working in Lyft, teaching people to travel, um, helping them learn the bus system in Vancouver, Washington, helping them get to the same community college that I was attending. And all of a sudden it became a lot more clear why O&M was so important. And I've started to develop a passion for helping people learn how to get out and to be comfortable, um, helping them to break out of that shell that I was once in as someone who was maybe hesitant to learn orientation mobility or didn't quite see its value. Uh, later on I chose to travel with a guide dog. Um, I knew several people that had guide dogs. It seemed like a very interesting way to travel, much different than traveling with a cane.

Jake Koch ([05:50](#)):

Neither tool is better than the other, but it was a just a much different way. Um, love dogs, grew up with dogs and in doing that and, and going into, um, guide dog school and, and, uh, learning to travel with a guide dog, I also got to see how a guide dog school runs a residential education vision rehab program, essentially. How does a guide dog school work? And I, I got really excited about that, really interested just in the way that things were ran, the efficiency level, um, just the perspective, the types of people

that the guide dog schools were, were serving. And that's what sort of got me excited. I was like, wow, I love animals. I love people. Maybe there's a way that I can work with both and take a build on top of this knowledge of, um, potential education and, you know, my passion for, for good ONM.

Amy Parker ([06:45](#)):

Jake, that sounds absolutely fantastic. You know, as you were talking, it sounded like you had this aha moment when you first were in the lift program, then becoming an instructor. Can you share a little bit about maybe something that resonated with you when you started teaching other people how to be more independent?

Jake Koch ([07:11](#)):

Yeah. Um, I think it was a series of, of small aha moments that kind of culminated in a bigger picture. Um, so what I started to notice was I would be working with a student, um, or students and maybe we would go on an outing and maybe at the beginning of the year was the outing was to the local bowling alley or maybe to the mall, relatively straightforward route. Um, not, not a lot of complexity to it. But then as the year progressed, um, some of my students would express bigger interests. Hey, we found this really cool restaurant over in Portland that we would really like to try. How, how would we get there? And that was always the question that I would ask them, how do you think we should get there? And even when people said to me, Oh, I would love to go out, but I, I don't know the route, I don't know how to get there.

Jake Koch ([08:08](#)):

I would say it's not a question of not knowing how to get there. It's how can you get there? What are the steps that you need to take to do that? And so like watching people develop and be and sort of master that side of, of the skillset. Um, was really interesting. I also taught other living skills as well, cleaning and cooking and things like that. Um, and those were all really important too. So I guess, you know, at the end of the year when you would look back at somebody who started in September and finished in June and they were now renting an apartment, they were maybe taking summer classes, you know, they were going for it. That was always really exciting to me. That's big picture. But then on, on sort of a day to day, you know, the fact that you could help somebody that I helped master even one route, even if it was a simple route, but they could Brock that thing they were comfortable with it. That that to me always was very exciting and was a sense of accomplishment, not just for me like look what I taught the student, but look at what this student is able to do for themselves. And I think that was what I got a big charge out. It was like, this person can now do this for themselves and they can apply that going forward.

Amy Parker ([09:24](#)):

Exactly. Exactly. Well, I love how you phrase that. The question is how it's not, if you can do this, it's how can you do this? How can we do this? How can we figure it out? That's really exciting. And you've been able to take all of this knowledge, um, from the lift program, from your own lived experience, from your own history with your parents and their skills in providing uh, exciting and, um, engaging guide work and that you were a part of that, that, that you were a teacher then in the lift program and then you, you've taken all of that knowledge into your work at guide dogs. Explain a little bit more about your day to day work at guide dogs, um, and maybe how you're using different elements of what you've learned along the way.

Jake Koch ([10:19](#)):

Sure. Um, so my role at Guide Dogs is pretty dynamic. So, um, the outreach department at Guide Dogs for the blind is tasked with a variety of things, primarily helping people who are blind or visually impaired. Make an informed choice about guide dog mobility. It's not a sales pitch. It's really how do we help individuals who are blind or visually impaired want to have a guide dog or maybe don't know if they want to have a guide dog, make that choice. Cause it's a big decision and it can be challenging to make. And again, I'm drawing off of my own personal lived experience. I struggled greatly with this decision. And, um, so I take that into account a lot in doing that. Part of my job, I also work with blindness professionals. How can we become allies? Uh, I believe that an AT specialist or a VOC rehab counselor or an O and M instructor realist and a community outreach specialist and a guide dog school can all work together, can be in the same room or on the same team.

Jake Koch ([11:27](#)):

And to help, um, clients or students make the best decision for themselves in regards to how they want to try them, giving them that freedom of choice. So, uh, so I do that. Um, and then also community, uh, sorry. Um, philanthropy work guide dogs for the blind receives no government funding. We're privately funded. We're a nonprofit. So going out and working with our donors and connecting them with our mission. Uh, this has been a newer part of my job and what I've learned is, uh, are really are drawing on my experience in creating engaging content. So how can I connect these different groups of people to the mission of guide dogs for the blind in different ways. Um, potential applicants are going to have different types of interests than say a, um, a corporation that wants to give to guide dogs for the blind. And so, um, I've been helped along by this by having a degree in public relations and a minor in journalism.

Jake Koch ([12:29](#)):

So when you have that experience, you, you learn in school, how to assess your public's, how to determine what types of things are interesting to different types of people and how, how do you best, um, create external communication that's going to get them interested. Is it doing something like a Juno walk and experiential Juno walk? Is it doing something like a campus tour, a webinar, um, going out and giving a presentation to somebody, how are you building that community? And so I look at my experience both past and present and I use that in my everyday work to develop these different programs. Whether it's a simple program agenda for a presentation, a podcast, maybe it's hosting Portland state's, um, students at our Oregon campus. Um, while while these O&M students are learning about guide dog mobility, it's, it's finding a way to connect people to the mission. And that's really a big part of my job and something that um, I need all my experience to help me do every day.

Amy Parker ([13:38](#)):

Well your um, your proclivity for this, your skillset, Jake, it really shows that you have been able to integrate. It's a delight to work with you and it does make such a difference to our students going through the program to engage with you, to have that tour, to have that hands on, to understand that mission. Now from a practical side, can you talk a little bit more about when someone is ready, you talked about your own decision and how it is a complex decision that someone makes. Can you also talk about the practical skills that someone needs to have, uh, when they're ready to take this on to have a guide dog?

Jake Koch ([14:26](#)):

Absolutely. Um, so going super, super fact-based here real quick. Um, so guide dogs for the blind admissions criteria are, um, we need someone to have previous orientation and mobility training. And I'll kind of explain like what does orientation and mobility training look like in the eyes of an admissions department. And I got a dog school. Um, they also need to have three regularly traveled destination routes. These destinations can literally be anything favorite restaurant, coffee shop could be a workplace or school, et cetera. And then a person needs to be legally blind. We do serve people who are totally blind and who are legally blind both in our program and they are both very successful. So talking a little bit about what, what does, uh, O and M training mean to a guide dog school? Uh, sometimes people ask, well, do you need a certain number of hours or units or are you, is there some kind of measuring stick?

Jake Koch ([15:26](#)):

Um, the answer is what what we're looking for is that a person who's blind or visually impaired, a client or a potential client has all the basic fundamentals of orientation and mobility. Um, some examples include being able to, to safely, um, interpret traffic patterns and make a safe street crossing consistently. Um, whether it's a four way stop or a four way light intersection, et cetera of being able to plan and execute routes, um, remain dynamically oriented along the route. Meaning that when they go from point a to point B, they understand where they are along the route. Things like I'm heading South on main street and I'm approaching says Avenue, that sort of thing. Or maybe they're using GPS technology to help them with that. If possible. It would be great if somebody could have some non tactile travel skills, auditory cues, determining, Hey, what kind of space am I walking through?

Jake Koch ([16:29](#)):

Is it a wide open atrium? Is it a hallway? Um, there's actually an exercise that O and M instructor can perform and that is if a person is walking down a hallway, you can have them sort of free space walking without a cane and you can ask them to put their hand up when they sense that they're passing an open door. So if you've got multiple doors along the hallway, you can have them stop at a, at an opening and tell you that and kind of work on that skill set. And that's really helpful when you're working with a guide dog because you can't shoreline with a guide dog very well.

Jake Koch ([17:07](#)):

You can ask them, you can give them a suggestive term command to turn left or to turn right and the dog will find the first available opening. But, um, that's where having those auditory skills can come in handy is if you're looking for say, an office, you know, halfway down a hallway or something like that. Um, so those are some examples of, you know, good orientation and mobility skills. Uh, we understand there's a shortage of O&M. So whatever someone can get is a great start, um, for us. So if someone has had a few hours of instruction, that's certainly better than nothing. And we do have something called our orientation and mobility immersion program, which is a six day long program that can bridge the skills gap. So if someone only can get five or 10 hours of instruction but really wants a guide dog, we can take kind of meet them where they're at and bring them forward and kind of bridge the gap, um, to help them get a guide dog if that's what they so choose.

Amy Parker ([18:09](#)):

You know, Jake, I've heard about that, um, that bridging the gap program that, that some guide dog schools have developed and I think it's fantastic, particularly because of what you brought up earlier on the lived experiences of some people maybe that live in rural and remote communities. They just

haven't had ONM. They haven't had the experiences or as you mentioned, there is a, a really big shortage of Owen M out there. So they just haven't, haven't had the chance to develop that. I think that really, um, that's a smart way to meet the person where they are and not just say, Oh, well, sorry. Too bad you don't have the skills so you can't get a guide dog ever. Um, it's how do we bring you forward so that you can, if it's the right time and it's the right moment in your life to do this

Jake Koch ([19:03](#)):

well thanks for that, that very lovely feedback. It's definitely great to hear that from someone like yourself in the professional, in the field because we're all in this together and we, we got on to believe that if we're going to ask somebody to have orientation and mobility skills, we need to also give them the opportunity to get those skills if they can't get it through other means.

Amy Parker ([19:27](#)):

Right. Well I'm going to actually ask you something that's a little bit controversial. We actually are exploring at Portland state university because of the shortage of orientation and mobility specialist, we are exploring the use of distance consultation, not as a primary means of providing instruction to people, but as a way to, um, have a hybrid means of instruction. So if someone, let's say lives in a rural or remote community, let's say they are working with a guide dog or perhaps they are a cane traveler and they receive instruction maybe at a city center using orientation mobility, they receive some obviously face-to-face instruction that they need to get the skills that they need. What do you know about, um, or believe even about distance type of consultation after that to defer, follow up and does guide dogs provide any follow-up services that we should know about?

Jake Koch ([20:37](#)):

Those are both excellent questions. Um, I think there is a space for, for follow-up. I think follow up is a really important concept that um, can be brought forward and can be implemented. Um, if if done correctly. Uh, I, there's a working example of this. I have a friend who is receiving services, uh, and is trying to learn a local area, uh, that they're familiar with and the orientation and mobility specialist has sent them, um, maps, tactile maps for them to review ahead of time. And then, then my friend and the ONM instructor meet via zoom or FaceTime, one of those platforms. It doesn't really matter. And, and they go over the route and they talk about some of the challenges that might be faced on that route, some of the techniques that can be used. And it, it's a really thought provoking and interesting way, especially during this time where a lot of people are inclined team.

Jake Koch ([21:38](#)):

So it was already hard to access services. If you were in a rural area, maybe, uh, an agency's outreach program just couldn't quite reach that area of the state or, or, you know, just outside the service, uh, zone. Um, this, this could be another way to sort of bridge the gap. Do I think it's an end all be all? I don't think so. I mean, I, I think you got to have some, some hands on instruction, but as a supplement, uh, look, there are people out there going on YouTube and teaching themselves cane technique from YouTube videos, either from other people who are blind or so. So if that, if that is already happening, uh, the blind community itself has set the precedent. And so, you know, I'm speaking again, this is my personal sort of opinion here. Um, perhaps then maybe we should engage this a little bit and see, well maybe we can formalize it a little bit more. Um, there's definitely room to use technology as a way to sort of fill the gaps to help maintain skills or build confidence in a safe way. I mean, I think you have to be safe about it and you have to be really aware of the individuals themselves and their abilities. Um,

and, and the constraints that they face, you know, do they have access to sidewalks so they're walking down a highway, what does, what is the crossings look like?

Amy Parker ([23:01](#)):

Absolutely. Absolutely. Jake, you, you are, you are something else. It is a pleasure. I know that wasn't originally maybe even something we were planning to talk about, but I love what you said about the blindness community leading the way and helping shape that conversation appropriately. That technology is never, you know, even the, the, the greatest technology for orientation, um, it can't replace the need for hands on skills and face time, real and real time instruction. But, um, what you said was I think really thought provoking.

Jake Koch ([23:43](#)):

Well, thank you. It's something I've to kind of wrap my head around. Um, you know, relatively recently w with everything going on and also just the constraints that people are facing, um, to give people a little bit of inspiration. I'm happy to share with you the follow-up services that guide dogs for the blind provides, if that's helpful. Oh, absolutely. Please do. Yeah. Okay. So we have, um, a couple of levels of follow-ups that all of our graduates receive upon completion of our program. So first of all, we have a support center. It's essentially like tech support for guide dogs. It's staffed by a variety of staff, including guide dog mobility instructors, um, graduates, uh, and uh, veterinarians. So kind of covering all, all of, um, the areas that someone might have questions about. Um, so people can call in there and ask, you know, any time, you know, it might be a simple question, might be a really complicated challenge that they're working through and we can help them develop a plan of instruction specific to that specific need.

Jake Koch ([24:48](#)):

We can also use technology. We can use things like Google maps or Google street view when we're interviewing an applicants. So when admissions is processing an application, we ask people to list three destinations and we asked them a lot of questions about those destination routes. What are the challenges, what kinds of street crossings are you making, et cetera. We can also pull up Google street view and actually look at the route itself. So we we can see as an organization what kind of a route is this person taking? Are there sidewalks? Are there major crossings? We've had clients that will film their guide dogs work if something maybe isn't going as well as it could be. Um, there's always this sort of unwritten assumption that when the guide dog instructor is there, the dog always knows to be on its best behavior.

Jake Koch ([25:42](#)):

And that's definitely the case for some people. So what we can do is be, we can outsmart the dog here and use something like a GoPro, but the GoPro on the harness and have the person do a route and then review the footage later, um, to actually get maybe a more impartial view of what is happening. We've had applicants or assigned clients, um, graduates use FaceTime. So they'll call us on FaceTime and we'll look at the environment. Maybe there's a construction barricade or Hey look, I'm trying to get around this, this construction barricade or this broken sidewalk. Can you, can you help me, um, determine this. You know, some people live alone, they might not have a lot of support programs, so they're relying on us for that. So that's one tier. That's the telephonic support center. Then we do in person follow-up once a year.

Jake Koch ([26:30](#)):

Um, that does change if a person wants to change it. So, um, we do in-person follow up for the first two years of the partnership and then the client can opt to just go to a telephonic call, um, follow up. They would like, we do come back to doing an in person follow up visit after the dog turns eight years old because we want to start talking about that. Nobody's favorite word retirement, right? So, um, but that's up to the client. Some people want in-person follow up once a year, all the time. Some people say, Hey look, I'm a competent handler. I feel like I've got this, we're a good team. Just give me a call once a year. And that's great. And that's another way for us to have a touch point with our, our clients both in person or over the phone and as a way to keep everybody connected and keeps things up to date. Um, so follow-up plays a really important role in Guide Dogs for the Blind mission and how we help our, our dive dog teams stay happy and healthy and active. And it's something that definitely sets us apart in the field.

Amy Parker ([27:35](#)):

Jake, this has been such a pleasure hearing about these layers of work and you've, you've educated me yet again today on some of the detailed followup that you provide. Is, are there any final words of wisdom or just advice that you would have for the orientation, mobility students or for the field, any directions that you think this is going in that we should know about?

Jake Koch ([28:03](#)):

Great question. Um, first of all, I want to say that we're all in this together. Um, we're all on the same team. We're all in the same industry or field and I look forward to working with the greater blindness professional community. You know, whether you, like I said, you're an O and M student, you've been in the field as an O&M specialist for a long time. There's always an opportunity to have a conversation around mobility and guide dog mobility. And, you know, is it, is it a viable thing for your students and how can you, um, help your clients or students make that decision? Um, we have several resources on our website guide.dogs.com. Uh, if you go to the O&M resources tab, we have several instructional videos that have been produced by Mark Dillard and his team. Mark alert is our O&M services managers, the guide dog mobility instructor and O&M specialist himself.

Jake Koch ([29:00](#)):

Lovely individual. So if you're looking for how to help someone transition to working with a guide dog, if they come into your office and they say, my mobility goal longterm is to have a guide dog and maybe you're just starting out or you're just not sure, I encourage you to visit our website and check out those resources, no matter which school that applicant chooses to to apply to it. It's not guide dog school specific what we're teaching. We also have a guide dog readiness checklist. We broken the guide dog lifestyle down into sort of nine component parts. And each of those have several self-reflection and assessment questions that an individual could ask. So if you're working in a school or an agency environment, maybe you want to develop a self-discovery curriculum, this would be a great tool to do that. Again, it's a guide dogs.com under the ONM resources tab.

Jake Koch ([29:53](#)):

Um, we have found that the guide dog readiness topic is one that gets a lot of interest from folks in the O and M field as well as the greater blindness community. I mean, I've given multiple presentations on this subject at a variety of AAR conferences and things like that. Um, so didact schools are trying to do a better job at putting out more information that will help all of us work together, um, to help an

individual make an informed choice about mobility. And that's really what guide dogs is striving to do, both in our outreach services orientation and mobility immersion program and developing educational materials on our website that are free and available to anybody, um, that wants to use them. So even though you might specialize in teaching somebody, um, to use a cane, you know, know that, you know, a guide dog is another form of, of mobility and can be a valuable tool to somebody. And I would implore you to, to reach out any time, uh, either to me directly or to any guide dog school and ask good questions about the subject.

Amy Parker ([31:00](#)):

Absolutely Jake. And we will include your contact information in the podcast notes. Thank you so much for your time today and I look forward to our continued partnership.

Jake Koch ([31:12](#)):

Thank you, Amy for having me. It's been lovely. And, um, thanks to everybody for listening and for doing what you do, um, in the orientation and mobility community, both as an individual and as a professional. Um, your, your work is invaluable. So remember that when it's pouring down rain and you're trying to teach someone to find the bus stop.

Amy Parker ([31:32](#)):

Very good advice. Thank you again, Jake. Take care. You're most welcome. Bye. Bye.