Hadley Presents

White Cane Safety Day

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss orientation and mobility, with a focus on White Cane Safety Day, and our expert is certified orientation and mobility specialist, Kellee Sanchez. Welcome to the show, Kellee.

Kellee Sanchez: Good morning, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: I'm so glad that you could join us today. It's always fun to talk to O&M specialists, and so why don't you just start out by telling us a little about who you are, and talk about how you became interested in doing what you do.

Kellee Sanchez: I have been an O&M, an orientation and mobility specialist for two years. I got my degree and certification from Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches, Texas, and I became interested in O&M when my niece was diagnosed with congenital glaucoma. I think the fear, just the overwhelming dark cloud of, "Well, what if this happens? What if she loses all of her sight?" becomes real, "What are we going to do as her family?" And I started doing some research and this crazy idea of using a white cane came on to my Google and I looked into it and saw that it was called orientation and mobility, and I thought, "Well, this is something cool." I had been a teacher for 10 years. I taught eighth grade science, and whenever the sails went up, that's where the wind took me.

Ricky Enger: That's amazing, and I love that you actually have some direct experience with what it's like to have a family member who is going through that adjustment period and finding out about what it might be like to use a white cane, and there's a lot that goes into that. For some people, they're not quite ready for a white cane or the need for a guide dog or whatever mobility aid is that they ultimately end up using. Perhaps they're in the beginning stages of vision loss and they just feel like, "I don't really want this in my life. This isn't for me. Why do I have to do this?" Can you talk a little bit about why there might be that resistance and what are some things that you can do as an O&M specialist just to help with that adjustment?

Kellee Sanchez: That is something that I think most O&Ms deal with on a daily basis, with each of our new consumers, old consumers. I think a lot of it is just the stigma behind using a white cane. As a person with vision loss, there is nothing that tells you that you have a disability, and even our folks with low vision, because it's very difficult to promote a device that gives a statement, "I am blind," and I think people are very afraid of that word, blindness, because to some, it just means my whole world is gone. And part of O&M and vision rehab teachers are counselors, are advocates, I think our whole purpose is to ensure that with this disability, we are going to open more doors. And I think education is probably the most important piece of O&M, what the white cane does, what the white cane does not do, what our limitations are, but then how are those limitations, how are we going to change them to be opportunities? I think that's part of it, is being able to say, "Yeah, I mean it stinks, but we will get through it together."

Ricky Enger: Absolutely. I think that's so well put, just removing some of that stigma and removing some of the fear, because a lot of times it is the fear of the unknown and the fear of being seen as a weak or less than, and so having that support is just so important. What about families, though? Sometimes, thankfully if you are experiencing vision loss, you're not alone and perhaps you do have a support network, but sometimes families have ideas about things that may differ from yours or differ from what's ultimately best for you. Do families have resistance to cane use? What does some of that look like?

Kellee Sanchez: Absolutely. It's a very interesting dynamic, because whenever someone is blind, "Well they'll just move in with me and I'll take care of them." “No, we don't need your help. We can do everything ourselves.” “They don't need that white cane or that stick thing. I'm going to be with them. No matter where they go, I will be there," and part of overcoming that is listening, to listen first, because it's not only fear for the person who is blind or low vision, it's also fear for the family. What is the unknown? So listening to them and almost winning their confidence, because we see people who lose their sight. I work with adults, so they can be adventitiously blind as young as 22 and as old as 88, but no matter what, the need for life hasn't died, and winning the family members' thoughts of, "Let's don't dampen their joy, let's try to make it better," is probably the biggest battle.

Ricky Enger: That makes a lot of sense, and I love what you said about you can still show them that you love them, it's just going to take a different form, because there is that feeling of, "I want to take care of the person that I love," and sometimes taking care of them means being supportive in giving them the confidence to take care of themselves. So I think that it's important to keep those things in mind and just to be aware that you, as a family member, can still be very supportive of someone who is going through this and you can do that in a way that benefits both of you. Is there more than one reason ... we've talked about using a cane to keep from bumping into things, using a cane to remain safe and show cars, for instance, that maybe you can't see them so they should watch for you. Are there other reasons that a person might carry a cane, even if they feel relatively confident in their remaining vision?

Kellee Sanchez: With blindness or low vision, I think carrying a cane for different environments, different scenarios. Most people don't carry their white cane in their home, but they might carry their white cane in someone else's home, and for people with low vision, carrying an identification cane or a cane that is not an ID cane, but a regular red and white cane, for those circumstances. I think one of the important things, among other important things of an O&M, is understanding that we, as the O&M, are not the person with this disability. We are not the person who has to carry the cane or walk in their shoes. So being mindful that this is your journey, I'm just along for the ride. If you use your cane, great. If you don't use your cane, great. I'm going to be here no matter what. If they're on a Greyhound bus, then carrying their cane as identification so that the bus driver is aware that there is a person with low vision on the bus. The negative side of that is if you're carrying your cane when you get on the bus, but then you're not carrying your cane when you're off the bus, it gives people confusion and then asking questions, and then that becomes a whole other podcast.

Ricky Enger: You're absolutely right about that, and then of course there are times when carrying it can eliminate some of that confusion. If you're looking for a restroom, for example, and you're having a hard time reading the sign, sometimes having that cane will eliminate some of the awkwardness of why are you, as a man, staring at the woman's restroom?

Kellee Sanchez: Yes, I agree completely. So yes, there are pros and cons to everything. Pro, people know that you can't see things.

Ricky Enger: That's awesome. We are actually, at the time of this recording, approaching White Cane Safety Day. It's the thing that happens every year on October 15th, and I think that canes are worth celebrating all the time, but we actually have a day set aside for that. Can you talk a little about kind of the history of White Cane Safety Day? What is it? What do people do to celebrate? That kind of thing.

Kellee Sanchez: So there was a push by rehab state agencies and also organizations to really promote, and like you said, give awareness to the white cane and its importance. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a declaration saying that October 15th is White Cane Safety Day, and on this day, we are able to get together, as blind and low vision white cane users, guide dog users, professionals, advocates, and before that, we do a talk of why it's so important to use a white cane as a person who is blind and low vision, and things like getting the right of way of crossing streets or making sure that other people who are driving cars or in the stores are aware that this person is walking. They can't see you, so be aware of them. The White Cane Safety Day just kind of refuels, I think, O&Ms to continue to do our work and continue to do it with passion, but also gives a great spotlight to people who use the white cane to say, "You're cool, keep doing that."

Ricky Enger: And I know that ... I've participated in these sorts of celebrations in the past, and it's really a lot of fun, because people get together, they're displaying their mobility aid of choice, if they have one, there is talk about the importance of using that mobility aid, and it's just a really good time and good fellowship. Of course, things have changed quite a bit with COVID, and so how are we doing White Cane Safety Day this year? How have things changed, and what are you doing in your area? I know you can't speak to everywhere, but I think you're doing something virtual.

Kellee Sanchez: Yes. We have two actual virtual programs going on, one with the National Federation of the Blind in Alabama, and also Alabama Institute of the Deaf and Blind are also doing a virtual White Cane Day. I just got two invitations from both of those organizations, and the Department of Rehab, my agency, our goal is to gather up as many people as we can to say, "Log in at this time and follow the instructions." So it's a lot of we're apart, but together. I think that's probably been the mantra of 2020, so to login and be there and still get fueled, but also be safe.

Ricky Enger: Exactly, and I think that really is ... you're still capturing the most important part of this day, which is to come together and have that fellowship and be able to talk with and celebrate each other. Kellee, we've had a really great time with this interview and I hate to wrap it up, but we are approaching the end, and so as we do that, do you have any final thoughts of ... again, we're coming up on White Cane Safety Day, but just in general, do you have thoughts on what people can think about or reflect on as we approach October 15th every year and we start thinking about mobility aids? What should people just consider, for at least this one day a year?

Kellee Sanchez: Be empowered. Be empowered using your white cane. Be empowered having a guide dog. Be empowered because you are different. Blindness doesn't mean your life is over. Blindness means find a different way. You're at a dead end on this sidewalk, but there's an intersecting sidewalk, find it with your cane. And don't be afraid to ask for assistance. Oh man, I could go on, Ricky. I could go on forever, but I think overall, just be empowered to know that you're not alone and that you have a huge support system behind you to use your white cane without shame.

Ricky Enger: Excellent advice, Kellee. Thank you so very much for joining us. It's been a pleasure.

Kellee Sanchez: Thank you, Ricky. Have a great day.

Ricky Enger: Thanks for listening.

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