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Hadley Presents

Grandpa’s White Cane

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, Jim Hoxie and Joanna Jones, coauthors of Grandpa's White Cane, join us to celebrate White Cane Safety Day. Welcome to the show, both of you.

Jim Hoxie: Thank you.

Joanna Jones: Thank you.

Ricky Enger: It is so good to have you both here coming from, I believe, Spearfish, which I've never been, but it sounds like a beautiful place to be.

Joanna Jones: It sure is. And our book shows all the places Jim walks along the creek.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. And we're going to be talking about that book in just a bit, but before we do that, why don't we just get a couple of introductions from you all? So, Jim, we'll start with you. Tell us a bit about yourself.

Jim Hoxie: Well, as you mentioned, I live along with my wife in the Black Hills of South Dakota. That's on the northwest side of South Dakota. If you think of Mount Rushmore, we're about an hour, hour-and-a-half drive to Mount Rushmore. I am the lucky guy that plays the starring role in Grandpa's White Cane.

Ricky Enger: Awesome. I love it. And Joanna, how about you?

Joanna Jones: Well, I've been a schoolteacher for about 40 years, and then in the last few years, I decided to convert to being a children's author. And that's of course how this book came into being.

Ricky Enger: What an awesome story. I think we're going to expand on that a little later. What an interesting career to be able to tell stories to children, because I think we can let them know so much about the world just with a really good engaging story.

Jim, I know that you are, I wouldn't say you're new to the white cane anymore, but you haven't always used it. Can you talk a bit about what that journey was like for you? How did you go from being just a person who maybe didn't know anything about the white cane and then suddenly you have to use one yourself? What was that transition like?

Jim Hoxie: I was a very active guy. I still am, retired forester. Back in 2020... I want to say 2001. I was diagnosed with glaucoma and then in 2013, I was diagnosed as legally blind. It's a long learning curve. We've learned a lot and done well with it.

Joanna Jones: How about your transition with driving? Did you feel like that was okay?

Jim Hoxie: Well, it's a tough transition. I couldn't drive. I had always done all the driving with my wife, Linda. We gradually made that transition. I use the white cane and get around very well with it.

Joanna Jones: Yeah, but that's the big, tall, white cane today. When you first started, you just used a little grandpa cane and you make canes, so you used one of your own canes.

Jim Hoxie: Yeah. When I started, I really didn't have any training to speak of with a tall white cane. So, I used what I had, and I was given a shorter cane. It was white. After quite a few stumbles and hiccups, that's why I moved towards getting the professional training with the O&M and learned how to work with that.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. It sounds like you may have had an ID cane, what a lot of people call an ID cane. So, it's something that says, "Hey, I don't see as well as you might, and this is just to let you know that" but it isn't necessarily the same sort of mobility aid. And as you say that training in how to use a cane is so important and such an essential thing to make sure that you are using it safely and eventually that you can tell others about what its purpose is.

Joanna, you are probably quite familiar with the white cane now, but perhaps you weren't always. So, I'm just curious if you as, I guess, a member of the general public, did you have some thoughts about what the cane was for, how it worked and how was Jim able to set you straight on a couple of things or were you mostly right about what you thought?

Joanna Jones: That was where Jim and I were talking and I know that a white cane means that the person's probably blind and help them if they need help. That was the total of what I knew prior to writing this book. When you ask, what did I really know? I'd have to say, "No, I didn't know anything." Even if I had just closed my eyes and started walking around, I still wouldn't have had the right feel. But in writing the book, the process became, with our illustrator where, what does the white cane do? How do you get a rhythm with how to walk with it? How do you position it in your hand? How are you going to have the human guide position? All of those details in the book became where Jim would tell me what they were, our illustrator tried to take pictures, but then the two sighted people, myself and our illustrator, we had to really look at the image and see if it was what Jim was telling us. And then we'd always go back and say, "Model it again, Jim." And we took more pictures.

The piece that Jim really felt was so important was to make sure the accuracy of how the cane was being held, how the human guide was being positioned next to the body. All of these things were so very important because we want the visually impaired to know that there's accuracy in this book. That's what we were really trying to establish. And hopefully, that's what you saw, or those around you saw when they looked at the book too.

Jim Hoxie: I do have some vision. And so, using magnification and that Closed Circuit TV, I could see the book and Joanna is exactly right. We had a long journey, but we worked out the details and it came together beautifully.

Ricky Enger: And Jim, how did it come about in the first place? How did you go from no training at all to then learning the proper ways to both use a cane and work with a human guide, all of these things that you get when you have quality training, and then how did you go from there to decide, "I've learned a lot, but the people around me probably still need to learn some things too? And wouldn't it be great if we could teach children about this?" So how was that going from no knowledge yourself to then deciding, "We should create a children's book"?

Jim Hoxie: It was actually with our doctor in Spearfish, and she happened to ask during the physical, "Jim, how are you doing with your vision?" And I said to her, "That is such a good question." And I'd never been asked that by a doctor before. And she was amazed by that. This is when I'd been through quite a few surgeries. And she said, "Are you a veteran?" I said, "Yes, I am." And she immediately got up and walked out, went to the phone and she called the VA and came back in and said, "Well, Jim, you're set now to be called by the VA. And you're going to be going to the Blind Rehab Center in Chicago." Veteran Hines Blind Rehab Center. Wow! I had no clue. I didn't know about these resources. And I had tried to learn about the resources, but no one had offered that.

So, it was exciting for me. I went and you can imagine a legally blind guy getting on a jet and flying from Spearfish, South Dakota to Chicago. That's a little scary the first time. And I didn't know how to use a cane. I'd been stumbling around trying. So, I made it alone and they picked me up at the airport and I had six weeks of one-on-one training with a qualified, certified trainer learning how to use the tall white cane. Now, along with that, we had quite a few other classes, but for me, the highlight was the white cane. The confidence and independence of using that was really awesome. That's how that came about.

I came back to Spearfish. And while there, one of the directors, assistant directors said to me, asked how I was doing. And I said, "Well, I'm doing fine, but it seems to me like a lot of people really don't know what the white cane is. A lot of people do, but a lot of people don't." He said, "How do you feel about that?" "Not too good." And so, he said, "I want to encourage you and challenge you to go back to Spearfish and think about working with middle school-aged children. So, when I came back-

Joanna Jones: Yes, when you came back and you started telling us all about this episode of how to get into schools and tell people about it. He talked to teachers. A couple of us are retired teachers around here and we said, “Well, Jim, if you want to get into a school, we'll just do that."

Jim Hoxie: We made it happen.

Joanna Jones: Yes, so we did. We just sat down. And of course, Jim being a forester was not used to teaching lesson plans. So, I went into the classroom with Jim, and we made our lesson plan. And then we also made sure that we had interactions with the children. Tell her about the canes you made, Jim, for the children.

Jim Hoxie: We wanted to make it educational and fun. I put together some wooden dowels that were maybe three, three-and-a-half feet long and they're painted red on the one end and there's a black handle on the other. And when we go into the classroom, we actually give the children an opportunity to follow me around the classroom. And, wow, that was really well received. They were enthusiastic, asked great questions. I see those children four, five years later and they're still saying, "Oh, you're the guy. You're the blind guy that came to our class." And sometimes they have a friend with them and they're telling the other child about their experience. It's great. It's fun.

Joanna Jones: It really is neat to hear this coming back again. But that was why when Jim was going into the classroom, after about two years of doing this, or twice we went in, I said, "Jim, we have a lot more schools in the area and we need to go out and talk to them." And between the two of us, we kind of said, "Maybe it would be better to just write it in a book, and then we could talk to kids all over the world." So that's what we did, was we started writing it after that second year of presenting. We wanted to make sure that everybody got a chance to see the book. But our first piece was with the Lions Club. They gave us some money so that once we got our book published, we could take the published book into our local classes here and they had those available for the children to read all the time and not just the day that Jim came.

Ricky Enger: It's gone from just there in Spearfish to, of course, now your book is available on Amazon. You can get that in print format with illustrations as well as on the Kindle. So, if you want to read it electronically, it's available that way as well. We will, of course, have links to that in the show notes. And again, I think it's such a great idea to distill all of those things that you were teaching the children. And probably you learned some things along the way based on the kinds of questions that they asked, and then to put that into a book.

Is there one thing that maybe it wasn't included in the book, but just one general thing that you wish the public knew about the white cane? Mine is, "Don't grab it, ever!" People want to take that cane, grab it, and treat it like a steering wheel like they can point you in a particular direction. That's mine. Do you have one, Jim, that you really wish people knew about the cane that a lot of them don't?

Jim Hoxie: We live in a relatively small community, maybe 12,000 people. And literally, I think I've not ever seen another person with a white cane. Having the public recognize what the cane is and what it's for and what that means is so important. And many, many people do, but some don't. So, one of the very important things for me is that people recognize and know what that is so that for my safety and for their safety, but they need to know that there it is and that's why I'm using it.

Joanna Jones: And I think, too, that in our book, we've put in those white cane sidebars that really help a person who is sighted to know what to do, how to help a person with a white cane. Just tell your name when you get to the person. Jim says, "So often people at church will come up and hug him," and he has no idea who's hugging him. I just so appreciate when I come into the house and I decided to hug Jim, I said, "I'm going to give you a hug so that I don't get this fist in my chest.”

Jim Hoxie: So true, so true.

Joanna Jones: Yeah, because you just don't know where the other person is. And the other thing is to return things back to their proper place so that when I use it, Jim can find it later. And I think that was one thing that you really had to work with here at the house, moving into the tall white came, everybody had to remember where to put stuff.

Jim Hoxie: Whether it's the Cheerios in the morning or the remote or whatever it is, where the sandwich meat is in the refrigerator. It actually has to be in the same place all the time. And that takes a long learning transition, both for my family and my grandchildren, and my wife, and for me. But it is really important that people understand that.

Joanna Jones: And even when we take things into school, I have to make sure I always have the same things and we have them in the same place in the classroom so when Jim turns to say, "Yes, we're going to use these canes, they're right there." Even though they're just a model and kids can make their own decision if they want to close their eyes or not when they do it. But it's just exciting to see that happen in the classroom.

Ricky Enger: Absolutely. I think there are a lot of just really good practical tips that you covered for making that transition a lot easier. And even though it can be... There's work involved. Teaching your wife, your grandchildren, people around you, "This is what helps me to feel confident and safe and that I know where things are."

At the end of that transition, if there ever really is an end, it's probably just a continuous adjustment process in some ways. But looking back now, Jim, are there things that you would tell somebody who is maybe just at the beginning stages of losing their vision and they're thinking about, "I don't know if I want to do this cane thing, I don't feel comfortable with it, it doesn't feel like me." Is there something that you would say to that person to make that transition feel a little easier or more comfortable?

Jim Hoxie: That's a very anxious time, at least in my life. Gradually, for me, I needed to realize that if I wanted to be independent and have confidence and feel safe, that I needed to have more than just somebody handing me a white cane and say, "Go to work."

Looking back on it, I would say to people that are thinking about this, that if they want to use a white cane and have that, for me, joy of using it, they need to consider getting professional help from a certified O&M instructor, that's Orientation and Mobility instructor, and they're available. Sometimes various states will provide that assistance. And if you're a veteran, a blinded veteran, then you can go to some of these facilities that are offered that are very, very good. I would encourage people to consider those, but it is work. You really, really got to want to do this, but for me it definitely is worth it. I love being out in the community. I hope others will consider that and move forward in their learning process.

Ricky Enger: Thank you so much for that. And if you're listening and you're not sure how to go about finding an O&M instructor, you can contact Hadley and we can put you in touch with someone in your state or with the VA, if you're a veteran, just to remove that bit of it from the equation. If you're struggling to find someone, we can help with that.

Jim, Joanna, I want to thank you both so much for joining us. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to tell our listeners before we wrap it up?

Joanna Jones: One of the things that I think Jim just really needs to tell you about is that we had a third grader one time come up to him after he had presented. And what did the third grader ask you, Jim?

Jim Hoxie: A touching moment. He walked up and said... Brings tears to my eyes.

Joanna Jones: It does.

Jim Hoxie: Go ahead.

Joanna Jones: The third grader was knowing that he was going to be losing his eyesight and he came up to Jim and he said, "I have so enjoyed practicing today, hearing about this. And you are really good at using the white cane. Can I come and ask you questions? Can you be my mentor when I need you?"

Jim Hoxie: It was quite a moment for me.

Joanna Jones: Yes, it was.

Ricky Enger: That is an amazing story. And Jim, just knowing that you are not just educating people who are sighted about the white cane, but you're also serving as an example for someone who's going to be going through that themselves. That had to feel just amazing.

Jim Hoxie: Yeah, it really did.

Joanna Jones: And it still does. One of the other questions that kids inevitably will be asking us, or they'll say, "My grandma has eye problems. Should she use a white cane?" And while of course we don't know, but we talk to them about the fact that there are resources in the back of the book where they can contact Jim. And that's important.

The third graders, we can really tell that they are thinking about being blind, the not seeing things. And so, they will ask Jim simple questions like, "How do you drive? How do you tell time, Jim? How do you watch TV? How do you even pick out your clothes?" And that makes a big difference when we know that we have actually made a connection with what is this white cane, this tall white cane, what is it all about? And I think that's really important.

Ricky Enger: Absolutely. And you never know what kinds of questions kids are going to ask. I had a friend who tells the story of hearing those questions that you have just mentioned. How do you watch TV? How do you tell time or cook or whatever? She was fully expecting those questions. There was one instance where she reached the end of her presentation and asked if there were questions from the kids. And one of them said, "I really like your backpack. Where did you get it?" And so, it was not just questions about blindness or low vision, but in general, when kids are able to see the blind or low-vision person, as, "You do things differently than I do, but in some ways, we're just the same too."

Jim Hoxie: For sure.

Joanna Jones: Exactly. We are.

Ricky Enger: Thank you both so much for spending a little time with us. I really appreciate it. And I know that our audience will as well. Just a reminder that in our show notes, we will have information on how to get your very own copy of Grandpa's White Cane. Again, congratulations to both of you on a fantastic book, and thanks for joining us.

Jim Hoxie: Thank you.

Joanna Jones: Thank you. We really appreciate it today.

Jim Hoxie: We sure do.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.