Hadley

Low Vision and a Love for Hiking: The All Terrain 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, Dave Epstein, inventor of the All Terrain Cane, joins us to share his story of vision loss and ingenuity. Welcome to the show, Dave. So happy to have you.

**Dave Epstein:** Thank you so, so much, Ricky. It's an honor and a pleasure to be here with you today.

**Ricky Enger:** I am just delighted that you're here and you have invented one of the coolest things ever, and we are going to talk about that a little bit. But I think just your story in general, the idea of finding an obstacle in your way and figuring out how to get exactly what you want and continue doing the things that you enjoy and being very creative about it. I think that is the fascinating bit. So I'm so happy that you have chosen to join us and talk a little bit about it. So before we get into any questions that I might have, I think the first thing I always like to ask people is just tell us a bit about you. Who are you?

**Dave Epstein:** Well, I was born and raised in Massachusetts. I just turned sixty. I do have RP, retinitis pigmentosa, and fairly progressive state right now. I've got about three degrees of central vision remaining and really not much left.

The diagnosis devastated me. It really, really did. I was faced with that decision at that young age. In high school, the guidance counselor said, "So Dave, what would you like to do for the rest of your life?" And now that I've got this, what I considered a death sentence at the time, going blind, now what are you going to do for the rest of your life? It was a long and arduous journey to find out where I'm going. I ended up taking six years off my life to just explore and play and really put RP out of my sights. I didn't want to deal with it.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah.

**Dave Epstein:** Until I had to make the decision go back to school and really get back on my feet. So I did. I threw a dart at the dartboard and said, okay, I'm going to be a forester. So out to Montana for forestry. Then I discovered my love for fighting wildfires as part of fuels management. It was legit in forestry. Fighting fires was a legit thing to do. So I spent about a decade on the fire line in the park service and the forest service fighting wildfires, which is really where I got my love for the outdoors. That's where I found my passion was outside, in nature, amongst the trees. So moving the clock way forward, my wife landed a position in Sedona, Arizona as a body worker for her mentor. I was fortunate to come along, yes, that's where our family was moving to, surrounded by 400 miles of trails right outside my back door.

I was ecstatic. Sure, I'm going blind, but she's got the career and I've got the trails. So I hit the trails as happy as could be, knowing that my vision at this time was really, really tanking. No longer did I have just a little bit of RP. Thirty, thirty-five years since my diagnosis and my central vision had really, really tanked to about 10 degrees and I knew I was in trouble. So I knew I needed help. I contacted the state of Arizona for O&M instruction, and now I entered that next phase of life, the white cane.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, so this is the phase where you’re working with an Orientation & Mobility specialist, an O&M specialist. And they are maybe giving you the cane, but they are also showing you how to travel safely with it. How to interpret what the cane is telling you and how to get around using this new device.

Actually, I'm so curious about this because I think people don't always say, you know what, I'm ready for a cane. There's generally some resistance there. If you can be without a cane, a lot of people will push that even past the point where it always makes sense. So what did you do? Did you wake up one day and say, you know what, it's time? Or was there some of that, you worked with the mobility instructor, and you thought, well, I'll do this for an hour and then put the cane away. How did all that go?

**Dave Epstein:** I knew that this was my future, and sure, everybody said, learn while you have some vision, seize the opportunities while you still can. But that was all very cerebral. That was all in my head. I knew that I should do this, and yet when I was on Main Street with that ridiculous white reflective thing in my hand, I was exposed. Every single person in Sedona knew that I was blind, and I couldn't escape it. I was about as raw, exposed, and vulnerable as I had ever felt in my life.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah.

**Dave Epstein:** Everybody knew, and I hated it. I'm sure like all of us, I fought it, I hated it. And I resented it so very much until after a series of events, I came to not only accept, but embrace the cane and my vision. This is all part of the development of the All Terrain Cane where I had to ultimately embrace that I can't see. But once I did, I looked at the prototype of this hiking cane that I was working on for me, and I said, okay, it's not just for me anymore. Now this is for my community, my blind community. That's when I embraced it. That's when I was like, I'm not alone in this. We need awesome tools.

**Ricky Enger:** It's such an interesting transition to go from everyone's going to know that I'm blind and I hate that to, “I'm a part of a community and we all need things.” I'm curious, something tells me it has to do with hiking and being able to do that, right? So you move to this place with all these trails, and then I have a feeling that maybe some things were not ideal initially. So, can you talk about just that moment of deciding, I got to do something to make this better?

**Dave Epstein:** Yes, and you're absolutely right. It was a moment. It was a very specific minute and a quarter of my life that changed the course of my history. That day and I refer to this as that day on the trails. You're absolutely right. That day on the trails, setting the stage, I was about midway into my O&M instruction. So I've been introduced to the cane. I had to give them a name. My canes were thing one and thing two, and I knew what they were supposed to do. Obstacle detection, terrain changes, navigation, letting the outside world, the sighted world know that I can't see, and this is how I ambulate. So I knew its role, and yet there I was on the trails with my wife. One Thursday afternoon, very late afternoon, she and I were hiking in the village of Oak Creek just outside of Sedona.

And the sun just dipped below, not the horizon, but the range, the mountain range. And I lost all direct sunlight. I lost the shadows, contrast, depth perception, and I was falling behind as we were hiking. My wife was up ahead substantially with our dog. I was struggling to keep up and I was tripping and falling, hurting myself, my ankles. Not having a good experience at all. I apparently started to mutter some beautiful poetry, just stunning iambic pentameters I'm sure, that my wife finally stopped and turned around and said, "What is your problem, dude? We're in the middle of the most beautiful place in the world, and all I hear is your magnificent poetry back there. What seems to be the trouble?" And I said, "I can't do this. I'm in trouble. I need help. I don't belong here. I can't do this. I need something. I need this, but I don't know what this is."

And what I was doing at the time was simulating painting on the trails, simulating that I'm smashing into the rocks and identifying everything that's in my way right now, all the tripping hazards and all the terrain and obstacles and, because that's what I knew. That's from my O&M training for the streets, that's all I knew about being blind, is how to get around like that. And I said, I need this, but I don't know what this is. Well, we got off the trails then sort of debriefed that night about what's going on? What do I need, where my head is at? The next day, I found myself at the local hiking store and I asked him, "Can you tell me your blind hiking section?" And he looked at me and said, "Come this way." And he took me to the first aid kits and the flashlights and the whistles and the water bottles, not exactly what I thought I needed.

**Ricky Enger:** Right.

**Dave Epstein:** So I ended up walking out of there with a set of trekking poles and off I went into what I call the cane lab now, which is a corner of the garage where I have a workbench and tools and sharp knives and duct tape and went to town. What do I need to do to convert this trekking pole into a mobility cane that I can effectively use on the trails? That was the first of three prototypes that ultimately brought us to where we are today with the production model of the All Terrain Cane.

**Ricky Enger:** Wow yeah. So if you’re listening and you’re wondering, ‘Okay so what is the current version of the All Terrain Cane? What does this look like? What does it do?’ If you’re familiar with the standard folding white cane, there are some similarities but there are significant differences here too. So, you can fold the All Terrain Cane, but it is much more sturdy so that it can provide support to you. It is height adjustable so if you need a longer cane for some instances and then you need to make that a bit shorter for something else that you’re doing, you can adjust that height on the fly. So this can be both a standard white cane that you move in front of you, and it can provide some support as you’re doing various things like Dave was using on the trails and other people use it for different things, which is amazing!

So, that actually brings me to a question, were you working with other people? Did you know other blind people at this point who could say, hey, this'll work for me, or no, that's just you, Dave? I think if you want a wider audience, you might need to change a few things.

**Dave Epstein:** I didn't. I didn't know any blind people.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah.

**Dave Epstein:** I refer to myself more tongue in cheek than anything that, I'm the token blind guy here. I'm the only one. There's nobody around to bounce ideas off other than my O&M instructors.

**Ricky Enger:** Right.

**Dave Epstein:** And very interesting, as I started broaching this concept of a supportive mobility cane, my initial feedback was one of more of a negative tone. You can't do that. The joints won't be strong, it won't work, it won't be strong enough. That's not what it's meant for. And the negative, discouraging words of, you probably shouldn't be going in that direction.

**Ricky Enger:** So what made you keep going then? How did you decide not only I'm going to do this for me, but I have a feeling other people are out there who want this also?

**Dave Epstein:** Back into college, I learned the word paradigm and what it meant. And when I find myself on the trails of Arizona, the word “no” doesn't work for me. Don't lean on your cane. Why? Ultimately, I can't get an answer for that. But in the wilderness, there's nothing to hold onto except cactus and dead trees. My goal is to ambulate with at least a small sense of grace. To me, grace is not falling face-first into a cactus out there, so I need something to hold onto. All the O&M instructors and the world can jump up and down and say, “Dave, don't. You're not supposed to.” I need it, so I'm not going to accept no for an answer.

What do I need to effectively hike? I started bouncing ideas of how to use the cane off of various O&M instructors. And sometimes I find that if I take a large step down, I'll tap the cane and really poke and prod to find where that next safe step is. And I'll tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, find the next safe step and on the move. Well, some O&Ms have told me, "Don't do that. You're wasting time. You're not doing anything." You know what? No, I am doing something. I'm making sure my next step is safe. So I stopped listening to the word no, and I just moved forward.

Yes, I will swing my cane. Not just from 11 o'clock to one o'clock. I'll go from nine to three o'clock if I need to because I want to know what's to the side of me. And if there's nothing but a cliff to the side of me, I want to know that too. So I stopped listening to the naysayers, even though they're the instructors, I said yes. And then as I've been getting invited more and more to present at various conferences and trade shows, I found myself standing in front of rooms full of O&M instructors. The first thing I’d say is, ‘all right, now we're going to lean on our canes,’ expecting wads of rotten fruit and veggies to come hurling towards me. Not at all. The reception is one of tell me more, show me, and embracing this notion of a supportive mobility cane.

Once that notion, that concept, became more accepted, people started approaching me with questions like, “I've got a low vision parent who has balance issues, support issues, stability issues, vertigo. Is this appropriate?” Like, oh my goodness, never thought of that. So a supportive mobility cane how interesting. And all we really needed was I guess for one person to say, no, I need this, and here we are.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, I love that story because it shows that when you find something that you need, inevitably you're going to find at least one other person who either has that same need or is going to take what you've done and use it in a new and interesting way. And in that way, just questioning, how can we use canes? Is there a right way and a wrong way? Well, it turns out when you are in different situations, like the guy on The Blind Life YouTube channel, I believe he was using the All Terrain Cane for ice skating or something that I would never have thought of, but he's enjoying it that way. So I think that's really cool.

**Dave Epstein:** It's really taking our perspective and just expanding it to where do we want to be? Because all we need are the right tools. We've got the training. With the right tools, where do we want to be? And it's not just for hiking the trails. A supportive mobility cane at beaches, parks, playgrounds, grand dunes playground, snowy and icy conditions, and that's just for outdoors. Also, any stability issues, balance, or vertigo issues in any part of our community.

Ricky, it dawned on me honestly a month ago, only a month ago when I was hiking with my wife. I trip all the time and I keep score on my hikes. Hey, it was a three and two, three saves, two assists. But it dawned on me on one particular hike that I only trip forwards. Now that may be a dumb or duh statement for any O&M instructor, but I only trip moving forwards, not to the side or back. And as a blind person, I have a cane and it's ahead of me. Now, my logical brain would say, use it. You've got a connection from your upper body to the ground in the direction that you're tripping. Let it be strong enough to support you. Let that help me stay upright. And to me, it's maybe a bit of brilliance, a little bit late in my life.

**Ricky Enger:** Oddly enough, I've never thought about it that way. Never. But you're right. If you're tripping, you're going to be falling forward. It would take a bit of talent or walking backward in order to trip some other way. So I'm curious about one thing as we come kind of to a close here, and your story is really remarkable because you took a need that you had, and you made it happen. And not everyone is an outdoorsy hiker kind of person. And so maybe someone is listening and thinking, okay, yes, I can use this cane indoors and it could be supportive and that kind of thing, but I wonder how does this apply to me in general?

What I'm really wondering about is do you have a piece of advice that you would share with someone who is facing a challenge, maybe they're losing their vision and they have been told, or they're telling themselves, I have to let this thing go that I love, whatever that thing is, I have to let it go. You didn't do that. So what advice would you give to someone who's in that same situation? How do you keep doing what you want to do and not let it go?

**Dave Epstein:** Wow, that's a heavy lift. That's a great and big question. For me, everything is quality of life. How much are we embracing our lives, our experiences, and knowing or learning the tools as we lose our vision? The cane, it could be anything and it could be high-tech, it could be low tech or a dog. As we embrace our tools, it doesn't make us different. It doesn't separate us. It allows us to stay in the game. There's nothing moral or ethical. It doesn't involve any of those words. We're human beings and we get to stay in the game with whatever tools we need. And it does come with a story.

One day on a beach in San Diego, we drove from Arizona to San Diego just to bring the dog to a beach. And we're sitting on Dog Beach in San Diego, and I'm walking, watching with my cane, and I was observing a co-ed walked down the beach with crutches and her foot in the cast, and I thought probably some co-ed who hurt herself on a rugby field or a fraternity party or who knows what, but it didn't matter. She's got crutches and a cast, and nobody cared. The beach was packed with people and dogs, and nobody cared. The guy over there with sunglasses, eyeglasses over there, that person's got hearing aids, a walker, a cane. I was the only blind guy, but everybody on the beach seemed to have some kind of aid to help them with their daily activities. Mine just happened to be white and red reflective. But everybody had something, and nobody cared.

So I thought to myself, in that moment, Dave, you're not special. I hate to say it, but nobody cares. And what a blessing, that the magnifying glass wasn't on me. The neon lights weren't pointing to me saying, blind guy, blind guy. It wasn't like that. So we're all bozos on the same bus. We're all trying to get through life with the most and best experiences we can. Let's use them. Let's embrace them. Yes, I'm on Main Street with my red and white reflective cane. Embrace it. Otherwise, I sit home and have somebody do the errands for me. So with these tools, we get to stay in the game.

**Ricky Enger:** I really love that perspective. Yeah, I really love that because we do, we get in our own head and think everyone is looking at me and it's all about me and how am I doing and am I doing everything right or whatever. The truth is everyone is wrapped up in their own thoughts of that very same thing. But if we're out there using what we have and making the most of it and enjoying ourselves, that's what matters. So yeah, I love that. Dave, for people who want to know more about the All Terrain Cane, I know you also have some really cool T-shirts and other merchandise, where can we go to find out more about that and just what's going on with you?

**Dave Epstein:** Ah, certainly. Best place to get information on all our awesome items, great line of T-shirts, thank you very much for mentioning them, the All Terrain Cane, as well as our new kid-sister version to the All Terrain Cane, we're calling the Urban Explorer. All this information can be found on our website, which is AWarewolfGear.com, and that is A-W-A-R-E-W-O-L-F-G-E-A- R.com.

**Ricky Enger:** Awesome. Well, this has been wonderful, Dave. Thank you so much for stopping by, for sharing your story. I think what you've designed is really, really cool, and I just love your attitude and your approach.

**Dave Epstein:** Thank you so, so very much.

**Ricky Enger:** Thank you. And we will have links to Dave's website in our show notes, as well as a review from Sam over at The Blind Life if you'd like to take just a look and listen to the YouTube video where he takes it for a spin. Thanks again, Dave, for stopping by.

**Dave Epstein:** Ricky, so my pleasure.

**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@hadleyhelps.org, that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@ hadleyhelps.org or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.