Hadley

The Aira App: On Demand, Expert Assistance

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** Using the camera on your device and a trained person on the other end of the call, it’s easy to get access to high quality visual information. Whether you're choosing items at the grocery store or trying to find out what mischief your pet is up to now. In this episode, Everett Bacon and Jenine Stanley join us to discuss services from Aira. I'm Ricky Enger and this is Hadley Presents. Welcome to the show.

**Everette Bacon:** Hi Ricky.

**Jenine Stanley:** Hi Ricky.

**Ricky Enger:** It is so awesome to have you both. And neither of you is a stranger to podcasting. There is an Airacast as well and we'll have a link to that in the show notes of course. But for people who have not heard either of you before, let's just do some quick intros. So, Everett, let's start with you. Tell us a bit about you.

**Everette Bacon:** Thanks, Ricky. My name is Everett Bacon. I am a chief of blindness initiatives here at Aira. I was a user of the product pretty much since its inception.

**Ricky Enger:** Awesome. Thanks, Everett. And Jenine, how about you?

**Jenine Stanley:** So, I am Jenine Stanley, and my title is director of customer success and engagement. And what I do is interact of course with our customers, primarily through our two podcasts. We have Airacast and we have Access Matters.

**Ricky Enger:** Perfect. Well, again, it's wonderful to have you both. And it's interesting because I feel like on this show, Aira gets mentioned at least every second or third episode. And it is such an incredible tool in the toolbox. And when we mention it, we do say that, but we've never really had a chance to dive into what Aira is. So, I'm wondering if one or both of you wants to just give a sort of quick elevator pitch for what Aira is.

**Everette Bacon:** So, Aira is access to visual information on demand from a trained visual interpreter. Basically what that means is through your smartphone or a desktop application, you can get access to visual information. So, the trained visual interpreter can see through your camera and can give you information, can help provide you with navigation assistance to get you to and from your location. They can help you do any kind of visual assistance you might need, helping you with shopping.

**Jenine Stanley:** I'll add to what Everett said with one of our secret sauce ingredients here, and that is security and privacy. And the ability to read and keep secure your personal information such as health information, banking, etc. So, for those things that you don't really want maybe a volunteer, or a family member or somebody like that to have access to on your behalf, we are here. And we've got the protections in place both with our visual interpreters who sign a number of confidentiality agreements, and also in the background with our software.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, all really good points. And I think you've touched on some of the things in my next question, but we can expand on that a little bit. I think people when they are new to this and they finally find someone who's giving resources, they get inundated with all of these resources and so it's like, " Aira, be my eyes, look out, seeing AI." And a person is thinking, "Well, I have no idea which of these does which thing." And it feels really overwhelming and so sometimes people just don't do anything because it's difficult to figure out what's the right tool for this particular task. So, I'm wondering if you could just go through some of the things, whether they are mundane or maybe some really creative uses for Aira that you've seen people do.

**Jenine Stanley:** Yeah, probably one of the biggest ones that I hear is finding things that you've dropped. That's a big one. And I think it's interesting, Ricky, that one of the first reactions that people have is, "I'm a little nervous about calling because I'm not sure, I don't want them to see my messy house." Trust us, but we've seen everything. It doesn't matter. The visual interpreters are here to help you, and so things like picking up pet messes, that's a big one. Lots of reading.

**Everette Bacon:** I was thinking of so many different things I've used Aira for. From helping put together a computer desk to putting together a table and chairs that are on my deck. From setting up a pizza oven that I have on my deck as well. From looking up different ingredients for a dish I want to make, whether it be outside or inside. Whether I want to do some shopping on Amazon or Target. There’re so many different things that I've been able to use Aira for and get information.

**Jenine Stanley:** I'm sorry, Everette, you actually used it to help set up some medical equipment, didn't you?

**Everette Bacon:** I did. I did. I have a CPAP machine and it's completely inaccessible. And it's all just this digital screen and nothing else, and so I had to go through all the different settings and Aira was able to help me do that. It's pretty interesting. We talked about the other apps that you mentioned and what they do. I think what makes Aira stand apart is the trained visual interpreters are very professional. If I had a real-life paid assistant that was at my beck and call, that's what it's like. So, whenever I need something read to me on the go, it's just a simple tap on an app on a call button and I'm there talking with a live agent who's professional, who's going to get to the point of what I want done. And I could chit-chat with them if I want to, but they're not there to do any of that. They're not there to judge me. It's a whole different experience than anything else I can describe and that's why I feel like the service is so valuable.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, it really is a freeing thing what you said about you can chit-chat, but you don't have to. And the person is there to do whatever that task is with you, and you are sort of directing that. And it's so nice because with friends or family or... one of the examples I always think about is getting through the airport, I used to need to get assistance because I didn't want to miss my plane, and I felt like could I do this on my own? Maybe. But I would just prefer a human to be with me. But depending on who was with me, they might have wanted to do things differently than I did. And so, that freedom of I'm calling this trained agent and I'm able to say, "Yes, I do want to know about the food that I'm passing on our way to the gate," or "No, I'm really in a hurry. All I want you to do is give me directions." And there's no hurt feelings or any of that. It is, oh, you're directing me in how you want this service, and off we go.

**Everette Bacon:** Yeah, it's pretty amazing going through the airport. I was just like you. And I travel quite a bit, and I really was a bit frustrated having to wait for someone, when I got there to have someone help me through and find my gate to go through security and all that. And when Aira came along, it was completely freeing, and I can just walk right in, go right to security, and never miss a beat. Go find a Starbucks, find a restaurant if I want to.

**Ricky Enger:** Which is great.

**Everette Bacon:** Yes. Yes.

**Ricky Enger:** And having that freedom too, "Oh, there's the Starbucks. Now if I don't have the menu memorized, I've got my assistant there who can read that to me and off we go."

**Everette Bacon:** Exactly.

**Ricky Enger:** So, what's amazing to me is that we've gone a few minutes and somehow AI has not come up. I really feel like every conversation I have had over the past few months or so has somehow involved AI because it's become such a big thing. And AI is actually right there in the Aira name. It's the first two letters, so I know it's always been in the plan. But over the past year or so, it's become a much more prominent thing. So, in a couple of different ways actually. Let's start then with Access AI. What exactly is this? And why might you use it as opposed to chatting with a human?

**Everette Bacon:** So, Access AI is built into our app and it's basically our way of giving you image description. So, much like the other apps out there that have a very similar type of feature, Access AI, you can take a picture and get a response back from AI that describes you the picture that you just took. The neat thing is, we've done some very creative things that we think makes our product a little bit better. A, it is free. You don't pay for it at all, so you don't have to worry about paying for that. Anybody can use it at any time.

But we've built in some prompts that let the AI know that this is a blind person that's taking the picture and needs a little bit better of a description that's detailed towards a blind individual. We've also put in some neat things like if you want to share multiple photos, like let's say you've taken four or five pictures of your wonderful dog and you want to get the best one, well, you can put that in there and you can prompt the AI to tell you which one looks the most clear, which one is the best picture of all of the five. And so, it's a pretty neat thing to help you label all of your photos in your phone. And what else am I missing, Jenine?

**Jenine Stanley:** Oh, goodness. The big thing that we just added was verification with an agent. So now, if you're just not sure, you've got an image, you've got a description and you think, "Wait, is that correct? I'm not sure." You can verify that with one of our visual interpreters between calls. They take those verifications; they look to tell you if the AI is correct. And if it's not, they're going to correct whatever that error is and let you know. And this is really important, if you do something like take a COVID test, please, verify those results with a live human. You can also connect directly to an Aira visual interpreter from inside Access AI, and that interpreter will be able to see everything that you've done with the AI tool. And so, you can do that as well.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, really great feature because as awesome as AI is, it can get things wrong at times.

**Jenine Stanley:** Oh, yeah.

**Ricky Enger:** And so, it's one of those trust but verify things where if it is essential that you have that information correct, if it's not something subjective or whatever it is, just reach out and get that info from a human right there in the same app. So, Everett, you touched a little bit earlier on Aira is a paid service. But there's a lot that you do to minimize what users need to pay because I think we're all in very different situations, and what we can afford is different from person to person. And so, I'm wondering if we can talk about that a bit more. We will of course have a link to Aira and some of those payment plans, and descriptions of what they are. But for all of these tasks that people are doing, Aira’s looking at partnerships to make those free or very low cost. So, why don't we talk about some of those recent access offers, which is what you call them. So, things that people can do and have access to Aira without needing to pay for those minutes.

**Everette Bacon:** Sure. We're really proud of our access partners, and Jenine is doing a marvelous job of highlighting them with our podcast each month. So, I may forget one, and Jenine, if I forget one, let me know. On a retail level, we have partnerships with Walmart right now. We have a pilot with Walmart. We're hoping it will continue to be a full-time access offer throughout the year and years to come.

So, you can use Aira for free at any Walmart right now in the United States or at walmart.com. Just pull up the app. The app automatically tells you you're at a Walmart store and this is a free Aira access location, and you can use Aira for free for as long as you want in the store or online. And then Target is another access offer. Target is a full-fledged service, and we'll continue to do that. And so, you can use Target both in Target stores are online. We've partnered with lots of museums throughout the country. Some of the biggest ones, the Smithsonian in Washington DC, Natural History Museum here in Utah. There’re museums, a big one in Chicago that I'm forgetting the name of.

**Jenine Stanley:** Shedd Aquarium. Yeah.

**Everette Bacon:** Thank you. Yeah, Shedd Aquarium. Yeah, there's just so many. There's probably close to a hundred museums across the country that you can use it at across the country, and we're growing all the time. Many airports across the country, you can use it for free. And the neat thing about an airport is you can pull up the app usually when you're in the car and you've just pulled into the airport vicinity, and it'll automatically notify you that you are in an Aira Access location and you're at the airport, you can use it for there. Gosh, what other things am I forgetting, Jenine?

**Jenine Stanley:** We've got a couple of cities. In fact the city of Mesa, Arizona, for example, is an Aira access location for all of their public facilities. The State of Colorado. Can you imagine an entire state? Well, all of the state facilities in Colorado, including their state parks, is pretty amazing to me because they've got some absolutely incredible state parks there. But all of those are Aira access locations. And then we also have offers from different states with their blindness rehab state organizations. And so, if you are a client of a state rehab organization, you may want to check with them to see if they can provide Aira as part of your rehabilitation plan and adjustment to blindness plan.

**Everette Bacon:** Yeah, there's states like Alabama, Ohio, Texas, just to name a few.

**Jenine Stanley:** Yeah.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. And what's cool is if you're thinking, "Well, how do I figure out if the thing I want to do is an access offer?" There's actually a spot right there in the app where you can browse all of those things and go, "Yay, my airport is an access location," which mine finally is as of I think about a year ago, and very thankful for that. So, we have primarily talked about Aira. I think we have at least implied that this is a thing you use from your smartphone. But there are actually a number of ways that people can use Aira beyond an iPhone or an Android device. I know a blind shell is one of those things. So, if you're not into that lovely flat piece of glass touchscreen and you have a blind shell, you'll be able to use it there. What are some other places that people can access Aira? Some other platforms, I guess.

**Everette Bacon:** Well, first and foremost, yeah, desktop application. So, it's a pretty simple thing. It's not an app you download or anything, it's just simply a website that you go to. Xplorer.Aira.io, and you can log in using your same login credentials and you can use Aira on the desktop. You can work with a trained visual interpreter if you want to share your screen.

**Ricky Enger:** So, that would be like if you are having trouble with the website or something, and you just need someone to maybe click the mouse for you or show you where something is, that would be the kind of thing that you could do on that desktop app.

**Everette Bacon:** Yep, that is exactly right.

**Ricky Enger:** Great.

**Everette Bacon:** And then we also offer Aira with the Envision Glasses. So, if you're an Envision Glasses user, you can use Aira. It is available on that platform. Then we have also figured out a way to offer Aira on the Meta glasses. So, we don't have a direct partnership with Meta. We would love to get one at some point. But our engineering team is pretty resourceful and pretty phenomenal, and they have figured out a workaround, and it's really awesome because now you're using those glasses.

**Ricky Enger:** That's great. And I know we get so, so many calls about Meta glasses, specifically.

**Jenine Stanley:** Oh, I bet.

**Ricky Enger:** As Everett said, it's a really easy process to have that hands-free access, which is so nice, whether it's on Envision or on the Meta glasses to get everything that you would normally do on your phone, and now you're sort of wearing it on your face, so it's very convenient. Gosh, we've covered a ton of stuff. And if your head is spinning, then we are here at Hadley and certainly Aira is here too to answer those questions for you. So, don't be afraid to reach out and say, "Can I redo this? "Or "I was a little confused about how I might go about tackling this particular task."

But we have covered a lot. Maybe we've missed something though. So, we'll just do a final thoughts sort of thing from each of you. So, whether we've missed something or whether there's just something that you want people to take away from this, a lot of times people are hesitant to jump into something new because at least speaking for myself, I don't like change, and it feels a little uncomfortable to ask for help at times as well. So, any final thoughts that you would leave people with if they're on the fence and haven't tried Aira yet? Jenine let's start with you.

**Jenine Stanley:** Well, I have two thoughts for you. And the first one very quickly is that Aira gives you autonomy. So, I'm not saying you're never going to need your friends or family. It just means that you have the choice of where you get your visual assistance and how you get it.

The other thing I want to say is that Everett's team and customer care, if all of this is making your head spin, as Ricky said, they are amazing at walking you through technical issues, at helping you get set up with things like the Meta glasses. So, if you ever have a question, please call them.

**Ricky Enger:** Excellent. Thanks, Jenine. How about you, Everett?

**Everette Bacon:** I echo everything Jenine just said. The thing that I would just try to reiterate is, it is a very easy product to use. I know people get so intimidated by all the different technology tools that are out there. And Aira is one tool of many, but Aira can provide a lot of information, where if you didn't feel comfortable using all the different apps that are out there, I reckon can meet a lot of those needs.

We have worked very hard with the blind and low vision community. We have a number of blind advisors, testers that are always using and testing any new feature we have, to try to keep it very simple, very easy to use, intuitive, so it just makes sense. And I've watched so many blind people over the years that are a little intimidated by technology. And once they get the app open and they try it, they go, "Oh, that really wasn't that hard. That was much easier than I thought it would be." And then they start using the product more, and more and more. And so, I urge people to give it a try and let us know if you have any questions and we'll be happy to help you.

**Ricky Enger:** Wonderful. And you're so right about that. That first call, once you get that first call under your belt, it's like, "That really wasn't so bad. I was nervous to speak to a person or I wasn't sure I could find the button to call," or whatever it is. And once you've done it once, you realize this is a tool that can fit in my daily life and help me with things. Thank you both so much, Jenine and Everett, for stopping by, spending a little time talking about Aira. It's clear that both of you really love what you do. I think being customers first and then having the opportunity to join the team and add your expertise to a thing that you already love. Wonderful stuff. Thanks again. We appreciate having you.

**Jenine Stanley:** Thank you, Ricky.

**Everette Bacon:** Thank you, Ricky. Thank you for having us. And thank you for everything Hadley does. It's a wonderful service you provide.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. We appreciate that. Thank you.

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