



EPISODE 55: HAVE DOG, WILL TRAVEL

Event Date: April 4, 2018

Presenter: Steve Kuusisto, poet and author of 'Have Dog, Will Travel' Professor in the Center on Human Policy, Law, and Disability Studies at Syracuse University

Host: Barry Whaley—Project Director, Southeast ADA Center

VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER: Blog Talk Radio. (Music) Welcome to WADA ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act, and here's your host.

BARRY WHALEY: Hello and good afternoon, everybody, welcome to WADA ADA Live!. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, welcome to episode 55 of ADA Live!. I am Barry Whaley, and I am the project director for the Southeast ADA Center. Today we have a very different show for you. We will be talking with Syracuse University professor and author Steve Kuusisto about his new book and his travels with a service animal. As a reminder, ADA Live! Listening audience, you can submit your questions to Steve at any time at adalive.org.

It's my pleasure now to introduce today's speaker, Steve Kuusisto. As I mentioned, Steve is a poet and an educator at Syracuse University. He was born legally blind and raised in an era where he was taught to deny his blindness in order to pass as a sighted person. Steve managed for many years to compensate for his blindness. Then at age 38, he found himself laid off from his job. And faced with the realization he would have to travel to find work, Steve, with the help of "Guiding Eyes" met Corky, a guide dog that would change his life. Steve's first book was a New York Times as a

notable book of the year. His new book was just released on March 13th. His other works include "eavesdropping: A memoir of blindness and listening," and two collections of poetry, "Only Bred, Only Light and Letters to Borges." A graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop and a Fulbright Scholar, he has taught at the University of Iowa, Hobart and William Smith Colleges and the Ohio State University. He currently teaches at Syracuse University where he holds a professorship in the Center on Human Policy, Law and Disability Studies. He is a frequent speaker in the U.S. and abroad. His website is stephenkuusisto.com. Steve, I want to welcome you to our show.

STEVE KUUSISTO: Barry, it's great to be here.

BARRY WHALEY: So you have a new book, "Have Dog, Will Travel." What inspired you to write this book?

STEVE KUUSISTO: It's funny, lots of people who are not in the disability community generally know what a dog that works with the blind looks like, right, with its verifiable harness, and the guide dog or seeing eye dog as it used to be known, occupies a very considerable place in popular culture. There's lots of cartoons about guide dogs, you know, lots of images of guide dogs. There's been a guide dog U.S. Postal stamp. And yet the truth of the matter is, in general terms, people don't really know much about guide dogs. And it occurred to me that my own experience coming to -- working with a guide dog rather late in life might make a good story.

BARRY WHALEY: Yeah, everybody likes a good dog story, and I tell you, I have my own impressions of guide dogs. So I'm very interested to learn more. What sort of things did you discover while writing about your first guide dog? His name was Corky, right?

STEVE KUUSISTO: Yeah, her name was Corky, she was a big yellow Labrador retriever, probably in the area of, you know, 85 pounds. She was very fast, very confident, very poised. She was trained by Eyes for the Blind, one of the nation's premier guide dog training schools located just north of New York City. She was

remarkable at working in urban areas, particularly places with heavy traffic. And so one of the first things I discovered after going through the month-long training process and realizing that this dog really had my back, that she was good in traffic, she was reliable, that I could sail down the streets with her at terrific speeds, that I was safe in her company, one of the first things I discovered was that going places was really fun. And so there's a place in the book where I describe deciding to go to New York City, just me and Corky, for three days of just going anyplace I thought I wanted to go. Which was an entirely liberating thing for me. Because I didn't really have this sense before Corky that I could just up and go somewhere for the sheer heck of it, right?

So that passage of the book, you know, we go everywhere in New York over a three-day period. I go to jazz clubs. I go to a major league baseball game. I ride the subway. You know, I go to Coney Island and walk around. As you lived as I have and live a contained life, I actually lived places where I knew the terrain and never went beyond places I already really knew, to certainly have that sense of extraordinary freedom, that's a thing that able-bodied people have, right? I'll just hop in my car and go to Vermont or something, you know? This was my first experience of this, that I could just up and do something and that it would be not only joyful but safe. And to figure out that I achieved that at 39. I was 39 years old before I discovered I could do this. Which is why the book has a subtitle, "a Poet's Journey." Because the more confident and loose and curious and engaged that I became in Corky's company, the more I realized that this dog's very presence and her personality were, in fact, changing me on the inside. That I was becoming a different kind of person because of this dog. So that was an important element in writing about her. Just to convey that to people.

BARRY WHALEY: You know, to hear you describe it, you sound very joyous, like a liberating event, having Corky in your life and being able to expand your horizons. I can just hear it and sense it when you talk about her.

STEVE KUUSISTO: That's right.

BARRY WHALEY: I'm curious.

STEVE KUUSISTO: I'm agreeing with you. I think that's right. Ancient people who lived with animals all the time, you know, and even, you know, people up until the late 19th Century who worked in agrarian circumstances with animals, they understood the bonding that happens between an animal and a human being and how that becomes part of your everyday life. You know. And we lost something in, you know, the era when the automobile came on board, and people no longer, you know, had the family horse and, you know, pets are terrific. And we love our pets. But a guide dog is with you every day, every hour, right? Everywhere you go. And that becomes a kind of remarkable bond that is ancient in its qualities. And that also transformed me, right? I did become more joyous.

[Laughter]

I admit it.

BARRY WHALEY: I'm curious, you know, because you mentioned this confidence that came over you, and you mentioned the bond -- the bond that forms between you and the animal. But it's so much more than typically having a pet. I mean, there has to be a strong bond of trust between you and Corky, especially to navigate the streets of New York. I'm wondering if you could talk a little about that.

STEVE KUUSISTO: So for anyone out there who is visually impaired and is thinking about getting a guide dog, you know, you should know that it's not like they just hand you a dog and they say, okay, here you go. See ya. It's a very organic process. Right? You come to the guide dog school. And they pair you with a dog that will match your stride. Are you fast or slow, right? Are you a runner? Do you zip along at high speed? Well, then they have a dog for you. I'm actually an incredibly fast walker. And so Corky was just terrifically mobile and very, very speedy. In fact, you know, many of my sighted friends would just roll their eyes because they'd be walking with me, and Corky would take off, and they'd be, you know, lumbering along behind going, "hey, wait up!"

[Laughter]

You know, you don't show up at the guide dog school and just get handed the keys, and there you go, take off. They actually take you on country roads where there are no cars initially. And you learn how to, you know, put the harness on the dog and take the harness off and how to care for the dog during the course of the day. And then after you've done a little, you know, navigating in uncomplicated areas, they gradually, day by day, introduce you to more busy spaces, right? You go to a medium-sized city. In the case of Guiding Eyes, that's White Plains, New York. You know, it's a busy town, but it's a suburban city outside of New York, right? And you walk up and down the main drag there and visit department stores and ride on escalators. And you learn about making safe passages through traffic and, you know, navigating through traffic lights and things like that. But they take it very slow so that sequentially you're learning things about the dog and, of course, learning things about yourself. And it was early in that process that Corky actually jumped back forcefully from a car that was coming too close to the curb. And when a guide dog moves, they're attached to you via a harness handle, which is leather wrapped around steel. When the dog moves, there's no slack. It's not like a leash. And so you actually move with the dog. The dog is trained to make that maneuver. And so Corky moves back from a car coming too close, you go with her. And suddenly you realize, holy cow. This dog is great!

[Laughter]

You know, the trainer says, "drop that harness handle and love her up," you know, "give her a big hug and a treat." You know, that's a remarkable moment. The dog proves to you that you can really count on me. I've got your back, says that dog. Right? And that -- for me, that was pretty early in the training process. And I turned to the trainer and I said, "will she always do this?"

And the trainer says, "yep, she's always going to do that." And that proves to be true.

BARRY WHALEY: That's fantastic. I'm thinking about your travels. I'm thinking about you being in New York. I'm thinking about you coming in contact with a lot of people, Steve. I would imagine that there are -- that there's information or things you want the

general public to know about service dogs, in general, and guide dogs, in particular.

STEVE KUUSISTO: Yeah. Well, there's a lot of information in the book about, you know, what service dogs do and what's a real service dog, right, you know. What is a disability? How does a professionally trained service dog work? What kinds of things does it do for its companion, its human partner? And, you know, the fact of the matter is that, you know, you all know because you work at the -- you know, the ADA Center in Atlanta, and, you know, disability rights advocates, that a disability is essentially, right, conceived of the lack of ability to perform a major life activity. So, you know, seeing, walking, being able to, you know, lift things or, you know, issues of clarity of thought, these sorts of things. You know, hearing, seeing, all of these things. And service dogs are trained to assist their human partner with these disabling circumstances, right? So a guide dog, of course, is trained to guide a blind person not only through traffic but also to help them locate stairs so that you don't fall down a flight of stairs or trip when you arrive at a flight of stairs or steps, right? They stop and alert you. They point you. They let you know where you are. They're also trained -- although this is instinct, right, in an animal -- they won't let you walk off a railway platform. If the elevator arrived and there was no elevator there, you know, they would actually prevent you from stepping in there.

So in the case of the blind, you know, the guide dog is really a remarkable and profound, you know, helper, true for people that have dogs that alert them to blood sugar issues with diabetes or other, you know, conditions that the dog alerts the owner to, you know, dynamics. And dogs that are professionally trained to help people who have PTSD actually pick up on human emotion and help that person become calm and able to, you know, come back to themselves, if you will. And all of these dogs are professionally trained, and they perform a real service. And, you know, so I talk about that both in the context of blindness, and I also talk about the history of guide dogs, how they happened and where they come from and how they were the first so-called service dogs.

I like to say that guide dogs are the few, the proud, the Marines of the service dog

world. They are remarkably well trained and, of course, they come from programs that have, you know, an 80-year experience doing this kind of work. The number of things that dogs can do to help people with disabilities is really quite astonishing, right? They can assist people who have hearing loss to know that there's a fire alarm or a doorbell or traffic issues, right? Hearing-assist dogs are amazing. Obviously, canine companions for independence is an organization that trains dogs to handle or work with multiple disabling issues. They train dogs to assist people who have mobility impairments or use wheelchairs. Those dogs can open doors, you know, transfer money, you know, in a store, can pick up things. You know, they actually lend terrific assistance to people with varying kinds of mobility issues or paralysis

You know, dogs are really amazing. I'm happy in the book to be able to go into some of those things because they really can help us.

BARRY WHALEY: That's remarkable. Thanks, Steve. Let's get back to your travels a little bit. In an earlier conversation, you and I had, I kind of likened the book to kind of a modern-day travels with Charlie. I don't want to get away from that. Talk a little bit more, you know, the advantage of traveling with a guide dog for blind travelers, if you could talk a little more about that, that would be great.

STEVE KUUSISTO: Yeah. So the first thing I want to say is that if you're blind, you don't necessarily have to have a guide dog, right? There are other, you know, mobility methods, right? The use of a long white cane that you sweep in front of you can also detect stairs and obstacles. You know, many people do navigate with a long cane. So it's really, in a way, the decision to get a guide dog is kind of a personal decision. I will say that in my view -- this is my view only -- sweeping a cane in front of you to detect obstacles in advance and prevent yourself from stepping into harm's way is effective, but it's also, in my view, a kind of reactive way to travel. You're working your way toward discovering an obstacle. A guide dog is trained to look, you know, a block ahead or even more when you're going along the street. And so it's pulling. You move along with the guide dog. It actually steps out. So it's creating a kind of a motion engagement with its owner. The dog pulls. You're holding the harness. The dog is

looking ahead. It sees the skateboarder. It sees the person with the stroller. It sees the person on a delivery bicycle, you know, delivering take-out food. And it's moving fast, and it's making navigational decisions before you ever get to these things. And so the guide dog is faster than the white cane.

And people who really, you know, adopt the guide dog travel mode often report that it's like flying. You're just sailing down the street in a way that's really rather remarkable. And so that, for me, that transition to being able to move at speed with confidence and not be just moving slowly or, you know, trying to discover what was ahead of me, that was part of the liberating effect of the guide dog. So, you know, this is something I just want to say, that there are people in the blindness community who swear by the white cane. And while they may not be ill-disposed to guide dogs, you know, they want to be able to say the cane is just as good as the guide dog. And I won't argue except to say that I found that the guide dog was faster than the cane. And it comes with -- you know, it's like friends with benefits. It comes with other dynamics that are kind of great, right? People like dogs. I've had more conversations with strangers, you know, waiting for my flight in an airport or on an airplane with the dog that just start because of the dog. And, you know, a dog is an icebreaker. It's also something that connects human beings in remarkable ways.

I've had probably thousands of conversations at this point with people because of Corky and my subsequent guide dogs that those conversations are illuminating. They're lovely. They're remarkable. Sometimes they lead to actual friendships that come out of the blue. And so that's, you know, an element of the guide dog that I have grown to really love.

BARRY WHALEY: That's interesting. Yeah, thank you so much, Steve. Talk about some unusual places you've gone to with guide dogs.

STEVE KUUSISTO: Well, you know, there are a lot of unusual places that I've gone with guide dogs. Once I went into a salmon run in Seattle. This is one of those waterways that are built into the rivers that flow through Seattle. The salmon are making their way from the ocean up river, and Seattle has created a kind of a salmon

highway for them to do this. And you can go in there. It's like a little tunnel. And you can go in there, and there are aquarium windows along the walls, and you can see the salmon all moving along kind of like traffic on the New York State Thruway. The salmon are just nose to nose, moving along. And I was there with my second guide dog. His name was Vidal, also a yellow Labrador. And he caught sight of those salmon and went out of his mind. He was joyous. He began jumping up and down and was barking. He was, like, like at that! Look at that! I've never seen anything like that! That's fantastic! And there was a group of Japanese tourists there who wanted to take his picture and were laughing, you know, joyously at the sight of the dog who was, you know, so excited at seeing the salmon. You know, that's just the kind of thing you don't see every day, right? It was fun. Let's see. What other sort of odd places?

This is a bit sad. My mother had heart disease and had, you know, heart surgery. It didn't go well. And she lingered in the hospital for many weeks before finally passing away. I went to that hospital, you know, frequently, often daily, to visit my mother. And the sight of the guide dog in the intensive care unit just energized nurses and doctors and other patients. You know, I don't know how to say it. It just lit people up. And I would take the dog's harness off when the dog's harness comes off, it's free to be a regular dog. It's not working anymore. And the dog would visit with people and, you know, shake paws and wag its tail, you know. The joy that that brought to people, you know, under duress in an intensive care unit was pretty remarkable. And that's not a place you imagine, you know, a dog or, you know, hopefully, you know, you don't think about going there every day.

Every plane flight, right, you know? Guide dogs are allowed to come on airplanes. They are not fake service dogs, as we're hearing a lot about this now. They're professionally trained to be good sports in public and behave well and be under the control of their owner. I was once on an airplane that lost all electrical power. And the pilot came on and said, "we're going to make an emergency landing in five minutes." And the engines were still running, but there was no electricity. And people panicked. And, you know, I turned to the woman next to me and I said, "you see this dog?"

"Yeah." "This dog is not concerned. I don't know what's going to happen, but I think it's going to be okay." And she said, "oh, thank you," she said. And then she hugged the dog. And, of course, we landed, you know. I could have been wrong. It could have been not okay. But there's something about the way a dog just decides to be in the moment, you know. The dog wasn't panicking. I wasn't going to panic. You know. That was a moment where the dog's presence, I think, improved things for people.

God, I have tons of stories, right? Places with a dog that you don't ordinarily go. I could go on and on about that. So, you know, that's, of course, the fun thing, right? I went to the ballpark in New York to see the Mets a couple years ago with my then-guide dog Nera who retired and has since pass add way. I kind of knew it was her last visit to the ballpark. We'd go to ball games, but she was going to retire. The hot dog vendor comes up to me and said, can this dog have a hot dog? I said no, she can't have any human food. Not really, you know. I said, it's just not part of -- you're told as a guide dog user not to do that, you know. Because they don't expect human food then. And then I looked at the guy and I said, she's going to retire in a couple of weeks. And the guy looks at me -- this was great. I actually love this -- he looks at me, and this is no New York, right? He looks at me, and then he drops the hot dog in front of the dog and goes -- he goes, "oops."

[Laughter]

And I loved it. I loved it, you know? Nera got her hot dog. You know, she deserved it. You know. The guy was hilarious. You know, that's fun. That kind of stuff is fun, you know? Here's a funny story really quickly. I once flew on a Delta Airlines flight from Columbus, Ohio, to Philadelphia. And it was my second guide dog who was with me on this occasion, Vidal. And about halfway through the flight -- it's a short flight, right, Columbus to Philadelphia. It's probably, like, 45 minutes. Halfway through the flight, Vidal began panting and, you know, looking distressed. And I realized, oh, my God, this dog has to go to the bathroom. And the dog looks really miserable, you know. So I said to the flight attendant, I said, can you alert the pilot that we have a guide dog here who actually really needs to go to the bathroom? And I said, so what I'm hoping

is that when we land and get to the gate, one of you, because you're airline employees, can take this dog off the plane, go down through the outside steps of the air bridge and let the dog pee on the tarmac? And I thought, you know, come on. I mean, they can do this, and I can't, right?

BARRY WHALEY: Right.

STEVE KUUSISTO: If I have to go in the airport, it's a 20-minute walk to the outside, you know. I thought, this is worth a shot, right? The pilot said yes! And so here's the thing. This is like a joke, right? And there are even cartoons that show this. The pilot coming off the plane with the seeing eye dog, right? And everybody's freaked out. The pilot actually took the guide dog, exited the plane, went out onto the tarmac with the dog. The dog peed, and he came back with the dog and said, you should have seen the looks of people when I came off the plane with this dog.

[Laughter]

It was really great. It was great.

BARRY WHALEY: You know, everybody loves a good dog story, Steve. And really, just as you describe how the dog enriches our lives and has a calming effect in frightening situations. The loss of electrical power on an airplane, oh, my gosh So it's just fantastic. Let's pause for a second. ADA Live! Listening audience, if you have a question about guide dogs or Steve's book, you can submit it at any time on our online forum at adalive.org. Now let's stop for a word from our sponsor.

Announcer: The Burton Blatt Institute known as BBI reaches around the globe in efforts to advance civic, economic and social involvement of people with disabilities. BBI builds on the legacy of Burton Blatt, former dean of Syracuse University School of Education and a pioneer in disability rights scholar. Burton Blatt was a pioneer in humanizing services for people with disabilities. Advocate of mainstreaming people with disabilities, he had family support services to better lives of people with disabilities. BBI has offices in Syracuse, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta. To learn more about the Burton Blatt Institute, visit their website at bbi.syr.edu.

BARRY WHALEY: Hi, folks. Welcome back to the show. We're having a great conversation with Steve Kuusisto, author about his new book, "Have Dog, Will Travel." Steve, it's been 80 years since guide dogs were first introduced to the U.S. Can you tell us a little something about their history?

STEVE KUUSISTO: Yeah, I like to make a joke that the guide dog is the only good thing ever developed by the German Army.

[Laughter]

But it is sort of true. After World War I or in the later stages of World War I, actually, there was a German physician who realized that dogs had been trained effectively to deliver medical supplies and messages in the trenches of World War I in the trench warfare. And, of course, that's a horrific environment, explosions and, you know, violence. But dogs were steadfast in being, you know, real help mates to the troops. And this physician realized that when he was working with blinded veterans at a rehab hospital, how much those veterans loved his dog. And it dawned on him that it was very likely that you could train dogs to guide blind people through the newly motorized streets of post-war, you know, Europe. And that was the beginning of the idea. The first guide dog school was founded in Germany in Potsdam. You know, dogs were trained to guide blinded war veterans just as guide dogs are trained today, you know, to watch out for curbs, stairs, cars, to be, you know, really amazing companions. You know, that idea spread across Europe. We're talking 1919, 1920. Pretty soon guide dog schools start in Sweden and in Britain, later in France, you know, Switzerland, you know. It starts to spread. And back in the United States, around 1928, a woman who was training German Shepherds in Switzerland, she was an American expatriate living in Switzerland, her name was Dorothy Eustice, she wrote an article for "the Saturday Evening Post." Almost everybody subscribed to it. It later descended as "Life" magazine. In those days, those magazines were like the Internet today.

She wrote an article for "Saturday Evening Post" about how dogs were being trained to guide the blind in Europe and what a tremendous step this was. And there was a young man in his early 20s in Nashville, Tennessee, named Morris Frank. And Morris

Frank had been blinded in a boxing accident. You know, he was young and athletic. And he really just wanted to go places, you know. He had trained with a white cane, but he read about this. And he thought, you know what? That's for me. That's what I want. And he wrote to Dorothy, care of the "Saturday Evening Post," and they forwarded his letter on to Switzerland where Mrs. Eustice was living. And he said, would you train a dog for me? I'm willing to come all the way to Switzerland. And she wrote back and said, "absolutely, you know, let's do it." And so Morris Frank set out. In those days he had to go by train to New York from Nashville and then get on an oceanliner and cross the Atlantic on a, you know, four-day journey. And you know, then travel by train to Switzerland.

Dorothy had a farm called Fortunate Fields. Which I thought is a great name for a place. And she hired a dog trainer named Jack Humphries to train this guide dog for Morris Frank. They picked a dog, a German Shepherd female named Buddy. The dog's original name was Kiss. And Morris decided he didn't want a dog named Kiss. He was too manly for this. So he was allowed to change the dog's name to Buddy. And they trained him with a guide dog. You know, they took him into traffic. They took him everywhere. He went all over the place. And then he got back on an oceanliner and came back to New York.

Now, what's interesting about this is when he got to New York, the story had already gone by way of telegraph and shipboard radio that a blind man with a trained dog was going to, you know, disembark in New York on the West Side Wharf. And the media showed up. And a lot of media, you know. We think that the media scrum is a modern-day thing that happens with only TV. But it happened then. He comes off the great Atlantic oceanliner with his dog wearing a three-piece suit, looking, you know, trim and vigorous and with this German Shepherd in harness by his side. And he's met by New York newspapermen and photographers. And it's just like a scene in a movie, right? And in fact, they did this scene in a Disney film where he's met by the press. And the press are just indignant.

You know, how can a dog guide the blind, you know? We don't believe -- this is hoo

haw, you know. The closest analogy for this I can come up with is if you remember when the Beatles first arrived in New York. The press meets the Beatles, and they say, you know, "who taught you to sing? Who do you think you are?"

It's a kind of, you know, press incredulity that we've seen before. Morris Frank says to the press, "this dog is not only trained to guide me, but this dog can guide me through, you know, busy traffic." And one wise-ass reporter says, "well, can he guide you across the West Side Highway?"

And Morris says, "you bet, watch." And the press is stunned as Morris Frank and his dog navigate their dog across what was even then in 1929 a really, really busy, you know, road. And there are photographs of this. I mean, they took photos of him setting off with the dog through traffic. And it became an instant sensation, right? That they were convinced instantly, right? Oh, my God, this is really true. And that photo went all around the world, through the wire services. And Morris Frank and Buddy became instant celebrities.

And then it was a year later that he convinced Dorothy Eustice to come back to the United States, and together they founded the first guide dog school in the U.S. called "The Seeing Eye," which is in Morristown, New Jersey. They started it in Nashville and then moved it to Morristown. And now, you know, all these years later, there are multiple guide dog schools. Most of them actually descendants of The Seeing Eye. The trainers from Morristown then moved or found work at alternative schools. They all cooperate, all the guide dog schools, sharing breeding stock and training tips. But that's the story, right? The guide dog became an instant celebrity hit. And Morris Frank, he really changed things, you know. It's a wonderful story.

BARRY WHALEY: Yeah. I'm curious just in hearing that story, is there a lineage of guide dogs? I mean, from -- I'm sure that, you know, certainly not every dog becomes a guide dog. I have two dogs at home, and I train them as best I can, but no way they're guide dogs. Is there a lineage of guide dogs?

STEVE KUUSISTO: Well, that's an interesting question. So in the old days, guide dog

schools really basically went to the pound or they got donated dogs from people. You know, if the dog had the right temperament and could handle tension and loud noises and backfiring automobiles and thunder, you know, all of those things and didn't bite people, right, that dog could be, you know, trained into being a guide dog.

But the big issue was temperament. Can a dog handle these stressors, and can it resist inflicting tension on, you know, others? Not bite you when it's feeling, you know, anxious and these sorts of things. And so the problem for the guide dog schools was they could train dogs, but they didn't have repeatability, right? You know, in other words, if you're out looking for dogs from the pound or, you know, donated dogs, you might get a good dog, but you probably got eight out of ten that weren't all that good. And so the guide dog schools developed, you know, in the '60s, breeding programs. And nowadays those programs are very sophisticated. And they actually are working on a canine genomic project with Cornell University's famous veterinary school, using, you know, bioinformatics and number crunching and all that. The whole thing is designed to pair dogs in mating that will produce offspring that are temperamentally able to do this hard work but then are also physically capable of, you know, being robust and not inclined to various diseases, obviously things like cancer or, you know, hip dysplasias or allergies.

They've become pretty sophisticated at producing dogs that are going to be able to do this kind of work. And even so, after spending millions and all that science, it's still the case that 50% of the dogs don't make it all the way through. And so guide dogs that don't make it all the way through training are highly desired as family pets. They're called release dogs. There's usually a three to four-year wait for one of those dogs. Because they are so much in demand. And it's also the case that dogs who don't work in traffic but are exceptional animals, smart and you know, strong and poised and all of that, but just aren't meant to work with automobiles, some of those dogs go to work for security, you know, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, you know, the FBI, drug sniffing and those sorts of things. You know, the dogs that don't make it find loving homes or meaningful and interesting jobs, to be sure.

BARRY WHALEY: That's interesting. So you mentioned, you know, obviously we talked about Corky, Vidal, Nera. Who's your current dog, Steve?

STEVE KUUSISTO: Great question. So my current dog is a yellow -- they've all been yellow Labradors -- my current dog is Caitlyn, spelled with a "C." She's 4 years old. They brought her to me two years ago. And Nera was still alive as a retired dog at that point. And the two of them were fast friends. Caitlyn, just like Corky, is very fast. They've all been fast. And she's in her two years with me already taken lots of trips. In fact, just ten days ago, we were in Tempe, Arizona. We flew to Phoenix where Caitlyn was thrilled to discover, unlike Syracuse, there was green grass. She even reached down and picked up a fallen orange. She thought it was a tennis ball.

[Laughter]

BARRY WHALEY: Steve, we're running out of time. I'd like to ask you to pull out your crystal ball and dust it off for a second. I want to ask you, do you see a time in the future maybe when technology will replace the guide dog?

STEVE KUUSISTO: I think that's possible. The tricky thing is that guide dogs possess a capacity called intelligent disobedience. And what this means is that if you're standing on a street corner and you tell the dog to go, the dog will not go if, you know, things don't look good, right? So I think it's a little-known fact, right, that the blind make the decision when to cross the street, not the guide dog, right? And we make that decision on the basis of knowing how to listen for traffic, right? And so when the traffic is going in my direction, I know it's safe to go. And, you know, it takes training to learn that. And then the dog gives you a double assurance because if you've missed something, I don't know, somebody riding 40 miles an hour on a bike that's coming and he's running the red light, the dog will, in fact, pull you back and prevent you from doing that. I think technology can probably do that. So I didn't think this 20 years ago when somebody asked me this. But I do now. I mean, I think that the breakthroughs we're having with self-driving automobiles and that kind of thing could probably produce a technological equivalent to the guide dog. You know, I think that that may be coming. I do.

BARRY WHALEY: Yeah, I would think that the bond between handler and dog is far stronger than between the operator and the technology.

STEVE KUUSISTO: Well, I think that's also true. And I will say that there's another side to disability. It's not fashionable to talk about it. But it can be stressful. You know, there are just obstacles and problems that come up. And having a remarkable, you know, canine companion, you know, not only do these dogs help people with posttraumatic stress, but they help other kinds of, you know, people with disabilities who have different kinds of stress. So, yeah. You know, I don't think, you know, a kind of wearable Google Glass, you know, synthetic guide dog is going to be able to do that. I don't care what they say.

[Laughter]

BARRY WHALEY: Good point, yep. Folks, we're out of time. I want to thank poet and author Steve Kuusisto for being our guest today. Please remember his new book "have dog, will travel: A poet's journey" is available now. I hope you pick up a copy. This show and all previous episodes are archived on our website, adalive.org. I also want to thank you, our ADA listening audience, the Southeast ADA Center, as always, is grateful for your support and your participation in this series and WADA ADA Live! Broadcasts. You can submit questions about any of our ADA Live! Topics by going to adalive.org. And please join us again on May 2nd. Our guest will be Leslie Fried from the National Council on Ageing. She'll be discussing benefits enrollment, Medicaid and Medicare.

If you have questions about the Americans with Stabilities Act, you can contact your regional ADA center at 1-800-949-4232. Again, that's 1-800-949-4232. And remember, all calls are free, and they're confidential. Have a great afternoon.

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