

Pigeonhole Episode 07

[bright ambient music]

Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

Meet the guests

[dog leash rattles, dog pants]

COLLEEN: Yeah.

[dog licks chops and licks microphone]

COLLEEN: [laughs] Do you wanna be on the job, babe? Are you gonna be a pain? Silly. Silly. OK, come here! [kissy noise] Can you sit? Down. [dog pants] Good girl! [dog licks her chops] Good girl. Yay.

So, Joplin is not only my first service dog, she's also my first dog.

CHERYL: That's Colleen Conner. Joplin, a two-year old dog, is off the clock at the moment, which is why she felt free to lick the microphone. When she's not working, you can often find Joplin carrying around a white Nylabone in her mouth. She lets it dangle, like a giant dog cigarette.

COLLEEN: Their job is to avoid obstacles, tell you where curbs and steps are. It's really fun to see how a dog can differentiate that at all. They know, "Oh, it's time to work" and then, "Ah! I'm outta my harness," wiggle wiggle.

CHERYL: It's not as simple as picking out a dog you like or calling an institution to let them know you're in need of a guide dog. It's a process.

[folky swing music]

COLLEEN: And that involves a doctor's note to prove that you're blind enough [laughs] to warrant getting a dog, you're physically fit where you would be able to walk and take care of a dog. Financially you need to be able to take care of a dog. I had to get three letters of recommendation. Do you have a fenced-in yard, where would you be taking them for yard time and walks? What do you do each day? Let's see.

CHERYL: Colleen's talking about trainers from [Seeing Eye in Morristown, New Jersey](#). This is the place where training guide dogs for blind and visually impaired people started in the U.S. Colleen also did a test called a Juneau Walk, where a trainer first checked out Colleen's mobility skills with her cane. Then, the trainer took the place of a dog on a harness to see how receptive Colleen was to the trainer's movements and how she did learning some of the guide dog commands.

COLLEEN: And they talked to me about my personality: what I like to do, what kind of music I listen to, if I sing, if I go to a lot of parties, if I'm a quiet person, what transportation do I normally take? And what would I want from this relationship with the dog?

CHERYL: With all this info and a picture of Colleen in hand, the trainer went back. They were looking to see if they had a dog who passed the puppy tests who would be a good match for Colleen.

COLLEEN: Apparently, they had this wiggle wiggle who was very smart and fast. And she's a Golden Retriever crossed with a yellow Lab.

Between the time that I submitted online to actually going to the Seeing Eye to live there for a month and meet Joplin and train with her was about a whole year. [laughing] So, when they first called me, puppy time, puppy time! OK. I'm like, OK, and I immediately do the, you know the professional interview like [laughing] customer service voice?

I'm like, [deep, breathy, formal voice] "Hello, this is Colleen."

"Hi, Colleen. This is so and so from the Seeing Eye. How are you?"

"I'm doing great. How are you today?"

"We think we have somebody we'd like you to meet."

"Oh! That's great. I'm so excited."

And my first inclination was to just just throw down the phone and start running like a Muppet with my arms in the air around the apartment like, "bl-bl-bl-bl-bl-bl!" But I tried to keep that inside and just go, "Really?! Yes, no, I'm so excited, and I'm very interested, yes."

Meeting Joplin

[pensive atmospheric music]

COLLEEN: May 1st rolled around. Once they called with my plane ticket information, I immediately went into this is a terrible idea. I shouldn't do this. I'm gonna be terrible for this dog.

I can't even take care of myself. I'm gonna be taking care of another being, another being. You know, it's not like I can fold up a dog and put it away at the end of the day! When I take the harness off, it's still gonna be there!

Oh, my goodness. What if they give me this giant, 90-pound Shepherd that's gonna haul me around and not gonna love? This dog is not gonna love. It will not like me. The dog is gonna hate me. This is not gonna work. This is not gonna work. This is not gonna work. What if I get home with the dog, and then all the sudden it's like, "Nope. I'm not guiding," and it just doesn't like-- What if I'm too fat to guide?

[lyrical atmospheric music]

I remember getting in the building and them orienting me to my bedroom. And I just started crying because everything was so accessible. It was the first time that just people knew how to interact with visually impaired people like we were people! They assume your independence, and if you need something, you'll ask. And there was Braille on the phone! It was just great.

CHERYL: It was two more days of interviews and walks together. By the third day, Colleen was ready for a guide dog or even for it to not work out. She was willing to go home solo if they didn't have a match.

COLLEEN: I'm sitting on my bed, and then I hear these jingles down the hallway. I get a knock on my door, and my instructor says, "Hi, Colleen."

And I said, [tentative voice] "Hi?"

And she goes, "I'm gonna open the door, and I want you to meet somebody."

And I said, "OK!"

She was like, "I want you to say, 'Joplin, come.'" Her name is Joplin. I was like...what?! Because I'm a music major, musical theater, and one of my huge fears was that I was gonna get this dog that was named something heinous. You have no say in naming the dog because it's been trained with its name. There was legitimately a Q litter with a dog named Quesadilla. Oddly enough, there was a fajita and a taco as well [laughs].

"Joplin, come." And she comes wiggling in. She starts weaving in and out of my legs like a cat. When I sat down, she tried to tunnel under my legs. But she was so soft. I think she's part chinchilla. But she's just this blond, blond girl, and she's got these toasty little golden accents and then these longer, soft, darker Retriever ears.

[clock ticks]

They leave you for two hours to just get to know your puppy. That was kinda the start of my journey. I was starting a relationship that I would also have to end. My brain is so forward-thinking that way, that I really had to shut down those thoughts.

After that I was just focused on our work.

[rumble of inside a plane, people chatting, bell]

COLLEEN: I was on the plane, flying home.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT: Flight attendants, please these doors for departure, cross-check, and all call.

COLLEEN: And I looked down at my feet. And there was a dog! And I just went, "Oh god! You're coming with me!" [laughs] I said, "OK. We got this. Here's a cookie. I don't know what's going on."

[bouncy, silly music]

She's a cross between a Golden Retriever and a yellow Lab. Goldador. Goldador! And there were some people that called them Glabs, Golden Lab. Which the more professional name, Golden Labrador. Some people just refer to them as Crosses. There's Labrador Retriever, is another one.

[vacuum whirs to life]

I call her a LabaHoover because she is a foodie, frankly, a tissue-y and a cardboard-y, and she'll eat anything. Goldiever. Goldiever. Retrievan [laughs]. Just straight up Retrievan. Doing her job! She does play fetch very well.

Joplin and Colleen's working relationship

[light, upbeat music]

CHERYL: Although Joplin's primary work is keeping Colleen safe as they navigate the world, she's taken on more and more work in the few months they've been together. Joplin is attentive to Colleen's depression, anxiety, and chronic pain.

COLLEEN: I think that these dogs are trained to be observant and have big hearts. The first time I was crying on the floor, she came up to me, and she put her face right in my face, and she just stared at me. And then, she just sat down right next to me. She just sat there, and she wasn't snuggle-bugging. She wasn't licking me, anything. She just sat right next to me like, "Hey, Mom. I gotcha." I cried harder because I was amazed by that.

Another time, I was having a nightmare, and I woke up to her with her little front paws on the bed and her face in my face like, "Mom! What's goin' on? You need to wake up. Something weird's happening."

They know that something's wrong. And I don't necessarily think a dog can be like, "Oh, you have chronic pain right now. Let me be a nurse and get you a blanket and stuff." But they go, "Hmm. Something's wrong. Mommy feels different. I'll sit near her in case she says a thing." That's kind of my sense of it.

I work from home. And then I have the Audio Description Training Retreats business. So, I'll travel and do these retreats, or I'll travel and do just one speaking gig or something. So, I spend a lot of time at home, and I spend a lot of time by myself because my roommates are more 9-to-5 type people. Where I'm living right now, I don't have a huge support or friend base. And so, I just have felt very isolated.

Now with Joplin, she's always right there. She wants always to be able to see me. Even if she's napping, she wants to open her eyes and go, "OK, Mommy's in the room." Otherwise, she'll come look for me. Even when I'm among the public, and I feel isolated, she's there.

JOPLIN: [licks chops]

COLLEEN: Is she dreaming and drinking water in her dream?

JOPLIN: [licks chops]

COLLEEN: What are you doing, babe?

JOPLIN: [licks chops]

COLLEEN: Oh, we just, we woke up.

JOPLIN: [licks chops, sighs]

COLLEEN: What [laughs]? Hi [laughs]. She's decided she's coming over to say hello. Hi, Sweetie. [Joplin's collar jingles] Do you wanna sit? Would you like to sit with Mommy? You're like, "Hey, we're talking about how you're not isolated anymore. So, I'll now lay on your legs" [chuckles]. I think sometimes she knows what I'm talking about! [laughs]

Awkward interactions with other people encountering a guide dog

CHERYL: For all the positives Joplin brings to Colleen's life, there's another side to things: Other people.

COLLEEN: She's adorable, and [laughs] she's my little biscuit. And so, people get really distracted by her. Whereas I would scare people with my cane, where I'm coming with the cane, and they're like, "Ah! Blind woman! Move outta the way! Oh my god. Move the children!" Now, they creep closer.

In general, I think people are aware of the protocol that you really do not distract or touch someone's service dog. They think I can't tell that they're gonna sneak a pet in. Or my favorite is the people who will already be petting her and go, "Oh! Is she friendly?!" [laughs] I'm like, first of all, you would've already found out at that point! Second of all, please don't pet my dog while she's working.

Even if we walk by, and you go, "That dog is so cute," that's OK with me. And even if you approach someone and ask. But the people who come up and just she's there for their pleasure, for their enjoyment for some reason. She's not for you. Your hands are on my dog. You might not have clean hands. You are distracting her from her work, and that affects her training all the way around. Because she's gonna start to think that even in her harness, every person who passes her is supposed to give her love. So, she's gonna be, instead of focused on my safety, going, "Look at all the people who will love me now!" [laughs]

And it's really grating and annoying, the people who, "I know I'm not supposed to pet her, but look at that face!" And they're already petting her. I'm like, "You just said you know you're not supposed to, and you did it anyway." These people just, those are the people that I have to be very short with: "Please don't pet my dog. She's working." And also, I don't wanna be the bad guy. I hate having to say all day, "Please don't pet my dog." She's a dog. She can't differentiate if people pet her all the time.

I've had people across a restaurant just, at the table next to us, she's being very good; she's under the table where she's supposed to be, laying down. And somebody in the table, I can hear them going, [kissy noises] "Aw, look at it. Hi! Yes!" [kissy noises] "Look at the puppy. Look at the puppy!"

They react to that. I don't care. The best-trained dog ever is gonna start going, "Ooooooh. I want the love. I need to..." And it's like they need to be validated. Like, they need to be like, "I'm the dog whisperer of dog people. This dog is so cute that it needs to acknowledge me and come over. And it just ugh..."

What a service dog is

[playful waltz]

A lot of people have questions as to should I get a service dog or not. It's something you have to take care of and love and support. If you put in the time and the care for the dog, you will get out of it a positive, multi-faceted relationship. If you wanna get a service dog because you heard that you can walk faster, but you don't like dogs, uh, don't get a service dog. It's a piece of medical equipment, but it is alive and needs you as much as you need it. You can't treat it like a cane.

And for people who are around service dogs, yes, it is a dog, but it's also a piece of medical equipment. And so, for those who are observing service dogs, that's what you need to do is observe. We are trained to completely provide all of the dog's needs. And we are committed to that. So, when you see a dog and a person working together, just observe it as what it is: this beautiful relationship that allows the person to be more independent and to have a companion. And know that we don't mistreat them. They are happy to be working. They like their job. And it's a living, breathing creature that is incredible.

OK.

[dog food bag rustles]

COLLEEN: Yes, I'll get your dinner. Sit.

[bag rustles, food scoops and falls into the bowl]

COLLEEN: I love you.

JOPLIN: [licks chops]

COLLEEN: I love you! OK!

[collar hits the bowl, Joplin starts chomping]

COLLEEN: And I say it every time: "I love you."

JOPLIN: [chomps]

COLLEEN: "I love you."

[upbeat theme music]

Wrap-up

Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at www.WhoAmIToStopIt.com, my disability arts blog. I'm Cheryl, and...

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.

CHERYL: Pigeonhole: Don't sit where society puts you.

[bright ambient music]

Music in this episode:

"[Bouncy Fun Song](#)" by Scott Holmes (Source: freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License and used with permission from the artist. <http://www.scottholmesmusic.uk/>)

"[lighting the night](#)" by Ketsa (Source: freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 License](#).)

"[Hungaria](#)" by Latché Swing (Source: freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.0 France License](#).)

[“Faith”](#) by Borrtext (Source: freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 License)

[“Our Home”](#) by Borrtext (Source: freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 License)

[“Associations”](#) by Podington Bear (Source: freemusicarchive.org. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 International License.)