Hadley Presents

Considering a White Cane: Who? When? Why?

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, Larry Carlson and Elijah Haines join us in honor of White Cane Safety Day to discuss adjustment to the white cane. Welcome to the show both of you. How's it going?

Larry Carlson: Great.

Elijah Haines: Great. Thanks for having me.

Ricky Enger: Awesome, so glad you both could be here. White Cane Safety Day, it's been around for quite some time. Sometimes there are conversations about the white cane that just aren’t had, maybe, as often as they should be. Why don't we let the audience get to know you both just a bit? So, Elijah, we'll start with you. Tell us a bit about yourself.

Elijah Haines: Yeah. My name is Elijah Haines, and I'm up here in Anchorage, Alaska. I'm working at the Alaska Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired. I am a certified orientation and mobility specialist, and a certified low vision therapist, as well. I do the role outreach travel here at the center, as well. Enjoying exploring Alaska and getting around, and definitely teaching cane travel in all sorts of conditions. Lots of snow sometimes, you can imagine, and here in town, as well.

Ricky Enger: And even moose. We were talking about that just before we started recording. You never know what you're going to get in Alaska. That's fantastic. Larry, how about you? Tell us a bit about yourself.

Larry Carlson: Married my high school sweetheart in 1981. Moved to Las Vegas, went through an electrical apprentice program, hired on with the City of Las Vegas, and I was a traffic signal technician until 2015, when I had cataract surgery. The surgery was in December of 2015. In February of 2016, my retina detached and tore in multiple places, so I've had issues with my eyes ever since. Was sent to DETR, they wanted to know why we didn't have audible head buttons, because they're also the Bureau for the Blind and Low Vision. While I was there, I walked into that fire hydrant that's right in the middle of the sidewalk.

And while I was bent over trying not to speak in French my partner just ratted me out, “He falls ever since the surgery. He falls over everything.” It was obvious that I've got a problem, and I probably need some help. A week later, I was ordered to report to DETR, officially, by the city. That's when they broached the cane of an ID cane, initially. And I said, "I don't need a cane, those are for blind people." She said, "You're really blind in the one eye, and you're wearing a Dixie cup, because you have no peripheral vision there." I was like, "Well, okay, yeah. But I can still see out of the left eye." And she says, "Yeah, how far?" And I was like, "Kind of." And needless to say, in 2017, they took my driving privileges from me, so at that time, I became un-promotable. I was like, "Well, if I'm not promotable, let's retire.” So I retired, and I've been retired ever since. I waffled a lot on that cane thing for a long time before I finally just said, "I'm tired of falling."

Ricky Enger: Yeah. And that's a fairly common thing, I think, just that adjustment. It's one of those things that people just have a difficult time with. It's not always this quick transition of, “Yay, I get to use a cane now.” And so, there are probably some misconceptions, some myths, about the cane that are out there. Elijah, do you know of any? Are there things that your clients misunderstand about the cane?

Elijah Haines: Definitely. I think one of the primary things is that some people don't see it as a tool that you're actively using. A lot of people think you just passively hold it, and then wander around and hopefully it will catch things in your way. But when they realize, no, there's techniques, and there are subtleties to the grip, and how you're holding it and adjusting it, and different types of canes. It's so much more involved on the part of the cane user than I think a lot of people realize in the beginning. I think, too, Larry, your story is so classic that a big misconception is that a cane is only for people who have no light perception or are totally blind people might say.

And not realizing that most cane users have some vision left, and a wide variety of vision. Some people might need it just in certain conditions and certain environments. It can be a useful tool for a lot more people than I think people first initially think, when they think of maybe the stereotype of a long white cane.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. That makes perfect sense. Even at Hadley, we hear that a lot. Larry, what about you? Aside from that big misconception, did you have any other thoughts about the cane that just turned out not to be accurate?

Larry Carlson: Besides the I'm not blind, I'm just legally blind, what I found was that less and less people seem to know what the white cane means. I've run into that a lot. It's like, "Hey, you can't have that in here." And it's like, "What do you mean I can't have that in here? Without it, I'm going to trip over things, and I'm going to fall, because I'm not going to..." If I'm looking forward, I can't see anything below my waist, so that's a real problem. I mean, people don't seem to understand that for me, it really is a tool. I mean, I can tell, and I can tell when I step off the sidewalk and I'm on asphalt, when I'm on grass, when I'm on dirt. It tells me what kind of environment I'm on where I'm at, and I can tell when I'm stepping and got that odd stuff called water. Being in Las Vegas, we don't have a lot of that.

Ricky Enger: I mentioned earlier that there’s this adjustment phase. Larry, you've touched on that a bit already. It's not just the adjustment on the part of the person using the cane, but also maybe friends and family. You get into a certain dynamic and then you introduce the cane and that changes things to some degree. Elijah, can you speak about that first? How does this go with your clients? What are some common things that you hear about, as people adjust to using the cane?

Elijah Haines: I think people have so many different reactions. And for me, as a specialist, it's really important to get to know the client as best I can, get to know their family environment, the background they come from, what type of community they live in, whether it's a bigger town or a really small town or village. That really determines how comfortable they might feel using a cane. Some friends and family members are a lot more proactive about the cane use than the individual themselves, because maybe they've seen them trip and fall, or they're having to assist them quite a bit. They might be relieved like, "Yes, please. Give them a cane and teach them how to be safe."

Other times the cane might be a bit of a disruptor in that caregiver role that's been established. The family or friend that's always there to offer their arm, and walk with them, and guide them around. All of a sudden, this cane sometimes is seen as a replacement for that, interrupting that dynamic and the friendship, or whatever it is. And so, that can lead to some resistance, because then that person feels like they won't be needed anymore, or that the cane user can just go anywhere they want now. And so, they won't be with that person as much. Some people can confuse, maybe, being independent with being alone. I've seen those two extremes of family being very proactive and thanking me for giving them a cane. And then resistance and some people saying, "I don't think they need that yet."

I just try to introduce it in slow steps for people. People initially say they don't want a cane. I, at least, hand it to them, so they can feel it, feel the weight of it. It's always a lot lighter than they think. They can feel the different tips on it, and they can walk a few steps with it. And if they hand it back to me and say, "No, thanks." That's all right. At least they've tried it, and so they know a little bit more about it than when they first came to me.

Ricky Enger: I like the way you put that, in terms of allowing the person themselves to make the decision. Because you can't force that, you can hand it to them, let them experience it. But ultimately, it has to be that person's decision to accept the cane. Larry, I know that you were pretty hesitant initially. So how was that for you? What ultimately led you to decide this cane is pretty cool? And then, your family members, what was their role in your journey toward acceptance of the cane?

Larry Carlson: I mean, I was off and on with it for, probably, about a year. I would use and I'd walk, and I wouldn't fall. I wouldn't use it on a five mile walk and I'd come back, and my pants were ripped, and the knees are bleeding somewhere, scrapes on the hands. My wife would be, "What happened," and she's like, "You really should consider that cane." I'm like, "No, I'm not ready for it." And then I took that hike at Red Rock. It was just a one mile out and back, and I saw these blobs coming at me, because that's how I see people until you get within, probably, a foot or two. You're just a blob. And I stepped off the trail, and the only thing I really remember is that I was flat on my back. I know somebody pushed me because I didn't fall. My son was right there, and he said, "Dad, you stepped off the trail and fell."

I got back to the trail head, and I couldn't stop the bleeding on my left knee. I decided from there on, because I'm going to carry this scar on my knee for the rest of my life, I was like, "This is just one of those things I'm going to have to learn. I have to carry it with me. This is what we're going to have to do." Once I got that all dialed in, I've been good with it ever since. But, like I say, it's just getting used to it. It's adding to your routine if you will. You hit the door and it's like, "Okay, car keys, keys, phone, wallet." I got to remember to make sure I have my cane, and I've got a spot right there by the door where the canes are all stacked up and grab the primary cane and go.

Ricky Enger: It sounds like once you did make the decision to use it, it did become an important part of your routine. But it took something pretty painful to get you to make the decision, and I think that's going to be so relatable too. There are a lot of assumptions that people make about the white cane. Whether a person is blind, or legally blind, or just a part of the general public with no vision disability, at all. When people learn a bit about the cane, they realize it can find steps, it can find obstacles, it can tell you about the environment that you're walking on. Are there other things that people might not think about, in terms of how a cane is useful?

Elijah Haines: Yes. And the cane can offer so much information. It's incredible. It just opens up your whole world in such a just beautiful way. But the auditory information it offers. For a lot of folks with typical hearing, the cane can offer so much information about the size of the room you're in as that tip is tapping and moving across the surface. The echoes it produces gives you so much information. The sound it makes on those different surfaces. I was walking with someone the other day and they were trying to find a specific street corner, and a couple different landmarks. And their cane happened to just ping against a little metal grate, which they knew was on the corner of that street. And they heard that little sound and, all of a sudden, it cued them right in.

I think that's something people don't think about a lot is all of the sounds and auditory information it provides. And different types of cane tips offer you different types of sounds, as well, which is really exciting to explore.

Ricky Enger: That's a great point. Thank you for that. Larry, how about you? Is there something that you were surprised that the cane made easier, or just something that you'd never thought I didn't know a cane would do this for me, or would make this particular thing easier?

Larry Carlson: I think the thing of it is, is I can look forward all the time, so I can see what's coming at me. The cane tells me what's below my waist that I cannot see. I can tell, okay, there's a crack there. The pull box lid has been missing in the sidewalk, so rather than stepping in it, I was able to stop, post up, and feel around and get around without falling. I can tell you on one hand that I've only fallen three times in five years with my cane. And before, without the cane, I can't go a quarter of a mile without falling down off of something. You get that feedback and... Well, I'm talking to you on my iPad. I don’t know how Apple Stores are there, but here the one that we go to all the time, it's all glass. If you hit the wrong aisle, you can't get out. But twice I've gone down the wrong aisle, I could sense something wasn't right, but I wasn't sure what. And when my cane hit it, rather than walking into the glass and smashing up, there's a wall here. Now, it's left or right.

Usually, by the time I have it dialed in which way I want to go, left or right, somebody's over there to help me out. I didn't have to walk into the wall to figure out that you got to go left, or you got to right, to get out the door. I mean, I went to a convention here a month ago at one of the casinos, and it told me that “Hey, you're on tile, you're on carpet.” And I was able to tell that, and then, when I was on the carpet, it told me you've got something in front of you. My cane said, "Hey, you got three steps," and I couldn't find a handrail, so I just, okay, one, two, three, no more steps and got to where I wanted to go. Having the cane just makes it so that you understand what you're walking on, or what you're walking to, and that sort of thing.

Ricky Enger: For somebody who is still on the fence after listening to this, or maybe they're just struggling with the decision. Is there anything that you would say to them that might make that decision a little easier, one way or the other?

Elijah Haines: I think just that it's normal to be uncertain about it. And if you're worried about the stigma of carrying a cane, and what people are going to think, or wondering how exactly you're going to use it. That's all normal. You're not doing it wrong. You're not adjusting badly. Or you're not a bad blind person, or whatever it is. That's totally normal to have that dilemma and struggle with that. I think just to realize that, as a society really, we've stigmatized the cane so much, and other mobility devices that, that's a very real thing to grapple with. I would say that if someone's still uncertain about whether they should use a cane they already have, or get a cane, hear more stories. You've heard Larry's amazing story today about his adjustment, and it's not always smooth. But if you talk to more and more people, it starts to normalize cane use. You start to realize, even if you feel like it, you definitely are not the only one that has been in this situation.

And learn how other people adjusted. How did they explain to friends and family when they were suddenly walking with a cane? How did they deal with those awkward interactions of passersby on the street every cane user has? I think the more people can learn and listen to those stories, the more they can picture themselves as a successful cane user.

Ricky Enger: Larry, how about you? What do you wish somebody had said to you before you fell a lot of times that might've sped up your decision to ultimately get a cane?

Larry Carlson: In my case, I'm just bull headed, so I'm not sure anything could've been said. Honestly, I don't know. I just had to come to the decision on my own. But I would tell anybody that's waffling on a cane or not, unfortunately we're not getting any younger, and it takes a lot longer to heal. All the falls I've taken, I could and should have more broken bones on my record than I have, because I didn't want to carry the cane with me and use it. I was concerned about what other people said, and I realized they can't live my life. I have to live my own. I hear it from time to time. Usually, it's high school kids, but not always, "He can see. He can see." Yeah, I can see, to a point, but without my cane I'm going to fall. And when I fall, I'm going to get hurt and I don't bounce back as quick I used to. The older I get, the longer it's going to take. You'll come to the right decision at some point. I mean, it's not an easy decision to come to, but once you come to it, it's fine.

Usually, once you make the decision, your family will get behind you. My family's been great about it. The grandkids either run well in front of me, or they'll stop, and they'll tell me that, "Hey, I'm here, or I'm on your right, or I'm on your left." They're three and six, and they're telling me this, so I know not to sweep into them. They'll walk beside me holding my other hand. You can't let pride dictate what you're going to do. Your health and well-being is far more important than your pride.

Ricky Enger: That is so perfectly said. This has been a really, really enlightening conversation just to hear from you both. Sharing your wisdom and just things that you've gained with your own experiences. As we wrap up, is there any final thing that, maybe, we didn't cover?

Elijah Haines: I'll just plug my field as orientation and mobility specialist. As a cane traveler, you can improve your skill. It's like a sport. There's a lot of different techniques and things to perfect, and a whole host of apps and technology to help you travel and stay on route. If you have a rehabilitation agency, or a state commission, in your area, or can connect with organizations where you can talk with specialists, or just experience cane travelers. Again, that's just a huge help, and you can improve your skills. If you're walking with your cane and you feel like something's not quite right, it might be time to reach out to someone to get some more practice.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, love it. Thank you for that. Larry, how about you? Any final thoughts you want to leave the listeners with?

Larry Carlson: In my case, I use the cane because I don't want to fall, and I don't want to hurt myself. While I don't have a lot of stairs around, if you have a cane, and you're not sure what to do, and you're not sure who to call, you can always go to Hadley and look up some of their videos on getting around. It's not necessarily a substitute for meeting with an O&M instructor, because that's by far the best way to go. But if you've had the O&M, like myself, the Hadley videos will remind you of something that you learned about, but then you don't run into all that frequently. That's been great for me. But I think the big thing with the cane is it's an icebreaker. It's a communication tool. I can talk to people because they realize this guy doesn't see that well. He's totally blind. And I inform them, "No, I can see, but I just can't define what I'm seeing."

They're curious, but they don't want to ask that question, "Why do you have a cane, if you can see?" And then when you tell them I can't read the sign across the thing, I just have an idea what it says. Then they understand and they realize that he can't see below his waist. It makes it easier the next time they run into somebody with a white cane, whether it's me or somebody else. They'll also understand that guy’s got a problem with his eyesight, and that's why he has the cane. He didn't just go to the store and buy one of those things. Somebody gave that to him. Because of that, he's not sitting at home becoming a problem for us.

Ricky Enger: I love what you said about how it can be a communication tool, and even an educational moment to show people that not everyone who's using a white cane is totally blind. There are times when you can see someone who's looking at something, and just the fact that there is this spectrum of vision loss. A lot of people don't know that, and the cane is a great tool to educate people on that. You've both shared such wonderful information today. And I really appreciate you both for joining us. I hope that for both of you, and for everyone else listening, it is a happy White Cane Safety Day.

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