Hadley

Safety, Self-Defense, and Vision Loss

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, we discuss non-visual strategies for safety and self-defense. Our guests are Hadley's Chief Program Officer, Ed Haines, along with co-founders of STRIVE4You, Christy Ray and Ricky Jones. Welcome to the show everyone.

**Ed Haines:** Thanks, Ricky.

**Christy Ray:** Thank you.

**Ricky Jones:** Thank you for having us.

**Ricky Enger:** I am so delighted to have you all here. It's a full house and I know we have lots to talk about, so we'll jump right into it pretty quickly here. Before we do that, and before we talk about this incredibly important topic of staying safe and ways that you can ensure your personal safety, defend yourself if need be, let's just hear from each of you and get a little background about who you are. Ed, we'll start with you since you're not brand new, so we'll just get yours done quickly.

**Ed Haines:** Sure. Thanks, Ricky. Yeah, I'm Ed Haines. I'm the Chief Program Officer at Hadley, and I'm really excited to be talking with Ricky and Christy today. This is an incredibly important topic and one of a great deal of interest to me, and a lot of learners have suggested that we cover this in the past, so we're delighted to be able to do this.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes, indeed. It comes up quite often. So yeah, this is going to be a wonderful way to just bring this much needed info to people. We'll move next to Christy Ray. Tell us a bit about yourself, who you are and what you do.

**Christy Ray:** Absolutely. As Ricky said, thank you so much for having us. I am one of the co-founders and co-executive director of STRIVE4You. Currently I'm overseeing our SEED program. We have a couple of different programs and obviously today we're here to talk about the SEED program, which is safety education, empowering defense. We've been doing this particular program for about two years, and we've had previous knowledge and experience of doing this. One of the big things is that we don't ever consider ourselves experts. We like to consider ourselves students first. We're always learning, just like everybody else. I am also visually impaired. I live outside of Nashville, Tennessee. I have three kids with the other co-founder, Ricky Jones. We have his, hers, and ours package. That pretty much should cover it.

**Ricky Enger:** Fantastic. Thank you for that. And we will have specific info about SEED in our show notes, so certainly have a lookout for that. In the meantime, let's go to yet another Ricky. So we have two of those on the show today. Ricky Jones, tell us a bit about you.

**Ricky Jones:** Well, thank you so much, Ricky. It's a two on one podcast and should make it very interesting, I would think.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes.

**Ricky Jones:** So yes, I'm Ricky and I'm very thankful to be here, love what Hadley does for the blind and visually impaired community and others. We've spoken off recording that both Christy and I had really benefited from Hadley, so we appreciate the opportunity to come back and speak with you all.

As Christy said, I'm the co-executive director, co-founder of STRIVE4You, a nonprofit based here in Nashville, but obviously has a national scope. I've been in the nonprofit sector helping with adaptive sports and recreation since 2009, so for about 13 years now. Christy and I actually met through a previous organization that we were a part of doing the adaptive sports and got involved with safety education, self-defense, and then found ourselves starting a new nonprofit together.

Like Christy, I'm visually impaired, or actually totally blind. I was born with vision, grew up with two totally blind parents, went to public school, and then around my senior year of high school started losing vision in my left eye due to the vascular grafting. So we have what we call at STRIVE4You, a peer-to-peer approach, which means essentially that people with visual impairment who've lived it, deal with the struggles every day, working with helping to mentor and encourage other people to be the best version of themselves. We have professionals in the field that work with us, what I call our sighted allies. They work with other professionals within the community to help get rid of negative stereotypes, and all that good stuff. But again, thank you for having us.

**Ricky Enger:** Well, we're so glad to have you. I kind of love the story of coming full circle, having been students of Hadley, and now you're here on a podcast to share what you have learned over the years and just looking forward to the tips and techniques that you're going to talk about today. So with that, why don't we jump right in and get started, Ed?

**Ed Haines:** Well, thanks Ricky. This is just such a great topic, and I think there's a lot of misconceptions about self-defense and I think if we're lucky we've never been the subject of an attack. And so, a lot of folks think that self-defense is about physical techniques, and that's generally because we see people defend themselves in the movies. I was just curious to get your viewpoint from your perspective, what do you folks believe are the most important aspects of self-defense? And I guess I'll shoot that to Christy first.

**Christy Ray:** Thanks, Ed. So, the aspect of self-defense is the physical, obviously, if need be. The hope is it'll be one of those 90% when someone is trying to help, and just being able to use what we consider in our curriculum, empowering words to advocate and say, “Hey, I'm good, I don't need your help. Please kind of step out of my bubble.” Whatever words work for you. That's the cool part about the empowering words is it doesn't require anything physical, but as I said, there is some physical, if need be. If it's in that 10% of absolutely I do need to defend myself.

**Ed Haines:** That's interesting. Christy, you're saying that generally speaking, 90% of the time if someone's touching you unexpectedly, it's probably just an attempt to help that's not wanted. Is that your perspective, Ricky?

**Ricky Jones:** Yeah. Over the years, not only being in this realm, teaching to visually impaired children and adults across the country, living it myself, it's been my experience that for some reason society feels like it's okay to come up and to grab us, because heaven forbid that we've ever walked across a room or sat down in a chair. It's just that preconception that blind or visually impaired are not even disabled, but worse than that, helpless.

So, that's been my experience with 80, 90% of just being grabbed because somebody wants to help us cross the street, or find a chair and it's okay, the intention is good. What people don't understand is, when reaching up and grabbing someone, you've got all kinds of different concerns there. You've got a disorientation if you are trying to cross the street or wherever you're trying to walk, somebody coming up and grabbing you. That can then put your brain into overdrive of the uncomfortable situation as it is, but then it can disorient you as to where you were trying to go, which can then lead you into safety. Somebody trying to pull you across the street is absolutely incredibly unsafe, because quite frankly, things can happen. And if they're going to happen, I'd rather be the one in control at the moment that they happen rather than someone else frantically grabbing me and pulling me across the street. So, there's a lot of concerns there.

The mental health aspect of just simply being grabbed, if you've ever had an unpleasant situation and then you get grabbed again, that can trigger all kinds of things. And so, for both physical and mental safety, we need to set those boundaries and make sure that we are absolutely saying, “I understand you're trying to help, but next time please ask.” And sometimes that's just a simple educational piece that you can do in a situation.

**Ed Haines:** That's interesting. Both of you talked about what essentially is practicing assertiveness and setting boundaries. A lot of us are trained just to be polite, right? We're trained not to make a fuss and we don't raise our voice or make a scene, et cetera. So when you have someone who's unwilling to practice assertiveness, or is uncomfortable setting boundaries, how do you get them to be more comfortable to do that?

**Christy Ray:** So I can speak to this quite a bit. I'm actually that person. I'm not assertive, I'm not a get loud and be seen person. And that's okay. If that's not your style, there are techniques to be able to still have that advocacy and say, I do still have boundaries. I may be quiet about it, but I'm still going to be nice about it, but I still have these boundaries. And it's okay to be that person and be polite about it.

**Ricky Jones:** I also think in some situations, being polite, taking a step back type person is okay, it's fine. But when it comes to your actual physical safety or mental safety, we absolutely have to advocate for ourselves. We have to be able to speak up. And for some people, like you said, it's very hard to do. So it's my opinion to surround yourself with positive people to help encourage you and practice. It sounds silly to do, but getting dressed in the morning, maybe practice again what we call our empowering words and our assertiveness of, “Hey, thanks for your help, but I don't need help.” Just practicing that over and over again so that when it happens, it becomes more of a second nature. I mean that's the whole thing about safety education and self-defense is there is absolutely no way that you can go to one class, one workshop and say, oh, I learned self-defense today. I can kick butt and take names, and I'll be safe for the rest of my life. You will find that the next day you wake up, you can't remember what you learned the day before, because it's just the way the brain works. We have to practice. Whether it be verbally or physically.

**Christy Ray:** And the first step is actually figuring out what your personal boundaries are. What's okay for you, what's not, where are your lines?

**Ed Haines:** I like this concept. It's kind of like building muscle memory. It sounds like assertiveness isn't going to come automatically to someone who's unfamiliar with it. They're going to have to practice it, and I like the idea of using empowering words and having some tools to bring to that practice. That's great.

I've had folks over the years ask me, well, especially folks who have lost vision later in life, they'll say, “I no longer can see who's on the street with me. I don't know what's going on in my environment around me. I'm worried about potential hazards when I'm out in the community, even in my home.” So in terms of practice, are there other strategies and habits that people can practice to make sure that they're aware of what's going around them, and to how to assess potential hazards when they're out and about or even in their house?

**Ricky Jones:** That's a great question Ed, and it certainly is something that we have continuously witnessed and seen over the years. Even myself, growing up legally blind and then losing my sight about 14 years ago, 12, 14 years ago, to be totally blind, it's a change. And first of all, you have to acknowledge, you know what, yeah, this is happening. This happened to me. And getting through that grieving process, getting through that stage of understanding life is different now, and I have to take different approaches to what were once easy items, things. And so, one of the things that I think is important here is getting away from the idea that self-defense is only about physical techniques. It's the things that you do beforehand. Having what we call situational awareness at all times of what's going on around me, what is the environment I'm in, what are some potential hazards? All that can be accomplished by honing in on your other senses.

What happens with blindness of course, is that we rely more on those other senses. So if you're walking down the street and you hear a ruckus, you hear maybe two people arguing, getting very loud with each other. Well that's an automatic, your spider senses, so to speak, should be going off at that point and understanding that it's probably, could potentially be a situation where I want to turn around and find a different path, maybe cross the street. If you are encountering somebody walking up to you, obviously know that they're walking up to you. One of the things that happens throughout society as a whole is people love to walk and have an earpiece or headphones on their head. That's not safe at all. You lose track of what's around you at that point, specifically behind you and from the side, even if you have good vision.

So, hearing people around you, if you are smelling gas for instance, obviously that's a safety risk. If you encounter someone, and you smell alcohol, that doesn't necessarily mean that someone's going to be aggressive, but it doesn't not mean it. So always keep that in mind as well. Your senses, again, smell, hearing, touch. Is there something going on? Do I feel heat? What do I feel? What's going on? The sooner that you can detect something, you can address it, you can figure out some game plan, you have a better chance of figuring things out.

**Ed Haines:** That's interesting. And what you're saying, it sounds to me, is that planning is really, really important, as well as just practicing awareness maybe in a more intentional way. And there's a lot of truth to that old phrase, appearances can be deceiving. Sometimes things can look safe, but they're really not. So I think with the techniques you're talking about, someone with vision loss can certainly be just as safe as someone without. So, it's really interesting.

You mentioned feelings too, not just being aware of stuff, but then how those things make you feel. We're often taught to not listen to our intuition, right? Things feel wrong, but we're taught well rationally, let's just not respond to that because it’s just a feeling. But does intuition play a part in self-defense, and should we be listening to those feelings we have when we feel something's off?

**Christy Ray:** In our experience and talking to others, just getting information on this particular topic, absolutely. Listen to it. The possibility of you've listened to it long enough, you've paid attention, it just does not feel right. It's easier to say, I'm sorry I was wrong, later, than it is to pick yourself up off the ground because you got hit by something. That’s kind of the thoughts behind that.

**Ed Haines:** Thank you. In your experience now, both of you, you've worked with a lot of folks. Are there some common areas or places where the participants in your program feel most unsafe? Are there places that you find keep popping up that people say, boy, that's where I really hate to go. What strategies do you give them to cope with those particular situations?

**Christy Ray:** You know, for some reason you say that, and the first thing that pops in my head is we do scenario training, and the first thing most people say is, I'm standing at a bus stop.

**Ed Haines:** The bus stop. Yeah.

**Christy Ray:** That seems to be a big place that people do not feel safe is at a bus stop. And really it goes back to that situational awareness and empowering words. Using the two of those together, if need be, paying attention to your surroundings, listening to what's going on, and having somebody with you if you feel safer walking with a buddy. Take them with you, make it a more fun experience, if you have that opportunity.

**Ricky Jones:** Well, I was just going to add that with the bus stop scenario, we've potentially told folks, if you can put your back to a pole or to a wall, if anything is going to come to you, towards you, for whatever type of encounter or interaction, you can have at least one area cut off of potential threat from behind you. Not only with being situationally aware, but also bring a buddy. I would also say planning ahead, as you mentioned earlier, Ed. For instance, where's my wallet? Am I going into a large, crowded area? Well, maybe having my wallet in my blue jean pocket where there's no button is not necessarily the safest thing. Could I move it to the front pocket? Could I put it in my bag?

I will say this, as blind and visually impaired, we have one hand on your cane using it. If you've got bags and other things, say grocery bags in your other hand, how can you appropriately address a threat, a potential threat? You can't do it as efficiently. So maybe carrying a backpack is a good idea.

And with everything I’m saying here, I would say, the biggest uncomfortable situation that we have ran across over the years has definitely got to be people saying, “I don't carry my cane because it puts a target on me, it brings extra attention to me.” And I get that. I understand that. That is certainly a thing that happens, yet at the same time, your decision not to carry your cane is adding to your unsafe scenario. It's adding to your situation to the point to where now we've got to deal with falling down steps, whatever it may be, running into things, and it's really not helping you any.

Having that confidence to walk with your cane is something that takes time, specifically if you've newly lost your vision. But I will say this, if you walk with your cane, with your head up, and chest out, good posture, walking down the street, even if you're not fully confident about where you're at, where you're going, that imagery of I do look at, you look confident plays a huge part in your safety rather than looking down at the ground or not looking as confident as you can be. So that's a lot to put in there, in your answer, but I just feel like those are some great things that need to be taught, touched on.

**Ed Haines:** If all of your strategies fail, and unfortunately you're really confronted with a physical assault, I've had folks ask me, well, I don't have any training. How can I be effective at surviving an actual physical assault? Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Christy Ray:** Well, I don't think we would do ourselves justice if we didn't first start by saying, STRIVE4You, make a phone call, an email to the SEED program and start working on trying to get services. And if that's not what you're looking for, something local in your area, something along the lines of a judo or a martial arts that has the concept of once you're touched, do not release until you feel confident that you can walk away.

**Ricky Jones:** Yeah, and another thing that we have to say is if anybody tells you that if you do this physical technique or if you do this, you are absolutely going to be safe, they are trying to put off a big pile of you know what. There is no single technique or situation thing that you can do to create a 100% guarantee. Self-defense is turning the tables, turning the percentage, hopefully more into our favor. And so, when you're thinking about things and you say, well, I don't have training. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but if you are confronted and you have a situation, the biggest thing that we can say for you to do, if you don't feel comfortable, if you don't have training, make yourself loud. Make yourself known, if you at all possibly can. Bring awareness to your situation so that you can have community support from other people.

I will tell you, any aggressor, generally speaking, will back off when there are numbers against them. They just won't do it. It's a primal instinct. It doesn't make sense. I would recommend carrying some type of personal alarm with you. Specifically something that's a key ring or something that you can put on the cord of your cane to where if something happens, all you've got to do is pull the sensor and make it loud. The other thing is to understand that if someone tries to take you to a secondary location, down an alley, behind a building or they try to put you in a car, I will just say this, fight like hell. Studies have shown if they take you to a secondary location, the likelihood of your surviving that situation is very low, and more than likely to an area where they have pre-chosen to go, and that is kick, scream, punch, fight. At that point, your life is extremely under threat. So that would be a couple of things to give you there.

**Ed Haines:** Okay, thank you. Good, solid advice. Do not let yourself be taken to a secondary location. I mean, it sounds obvious, but if you're in that situation and you're afraid, it's an easy thing to try to acquiesce. But I totally agree with you, and I like the idea of almost changing the attitude of the assailant, making noise, making them understand that you're not just a victim, that you're an unknown quantity that they're going to have to deal with and think about. Great advice.

Finally, I would just ask both of you, if someone is interested in learning physical, self-defense techniques, they want to take a class, are there specific things you'd recommend aside from the SEED program? If they're looking and their local town has a couple martial arts programs, what would you ask them or tell them to look for when they're investigating a class?

**Ricky Jones:** Well, I think Christy kind of hinted towards this in the last answer, finding something in your local area, maybe it's a martial arts class where the ones you want to look for are specific to those type of things where it's a lot of grappling, it's up close. Grabbing, so that once they make contact with you, you can keep that contact and be able to perform whatever techniques you need. Judo is a great one. Jujitsu.

There’re some great self-defense programs out there that give a lot of great information, but their concept is hit, kick, and then run. Well, that's not necessarily an option for us, especially if we get disoriented. We may knock our own self out running into something trying to get away. And that's one of the concepts and things that we teach as Christy said earlier, you have to defend yourself and get to a situation where you feel comfortable to let go, turn your back, find your cane, and walk away. In a stressful situation, that is a tall, tall order. And so, you have to be able to train with programs and scenarios that are able to give you that ability and confidence to do so.

**Christy Ray:** I think also taking the time to research other options. There are different books out there. Having knowledge is not a bad thing. So take that time to figure out what else is out there, and make your decision based on what feels right to you.

**Ricky Jones:** Great, thank you both.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, I really appreciate that as well. I think what we've talked about here, they are very actionable items. And to go back to what Ricky said, it's not a here's this one technique that if you can do this, you're always safe forever. I think we've talked really more about just some concepts to keep in mind. Empowering words, the feeling of confidence, situational awareness, being able to practice that. And then just as an addition to that, learning some physical self-defense. I think they all go together. So it's nice to, again, have a few things, a few aspects of this whole concept of keeping yourself safe, that people can research and do what feels right and authentic for them. So again, thank you so much for that.

For people who do want to learn a bit more about the SEED program, and the other things that STRIVE4You does, because I know that there are several, where is the easiest place for them to find you all and find out what you do?

**Christy Ray:** So our website is Strive, the number four, Y-O-U .org. You can use that same STRIVE4You.org and put my name, Christy, C-H-R-I-S-T-Y, at strive4you.org or seed.director@strive4you.org or even Ricky, R-I-C-K-Y, at strive4you.org. And that will get you in touch with us. Or you can check the website and if there's something else you're interested in, we will absolutely be ecstatic to help you find it.

**Ricky Jones:** I would also just point out that we're getting ready to set our calendar for the year and we're going to be having webinars on all these topics. As you were saying, Ricky, one of the key things, concepts out of this is practicing. Whether it's your empowering words, your situational awareness, whatever it may be. And so, getting webinars, trainings, workshops, we have instructors throughout the country who are teaching ongoing classes. Not every state yet, but we're working on that. So check out our website for upcoming webinars that we might be having for the SEED program as well. And then lastly, I would just point out we are on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and I would invite you to follow us there and keep up to date on what's going on.

**Ricky Enger:** Fantastic. Thank you so much for that. And again, we can't thank you enough for stopping by and sharing your tips that come from working with other people and just from your own lived experience. I think that's important and I think it's very valuable information. So, thank you again.

**Christy Ray:** Thank you for having us.

**Ricky Jones:** Yes, absolutely. Thank you.

**Ricky Enger:** Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T at hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.