

HERO★DOGS

HE CAN BE YOUR BEST FRIEND

Karyn Spellman Ash

Patton sat patiently by his trainer's side in the checkout line at the grocery store, waiting for the command telling him it was time to go. As the cashier put Ed Levien's change in his hand, a single coin fell to the floor. Patton quickly snatched it up and gave it to his master. "The lady behind me said, 'Did he just pick up a dime?' And I said, 'Yes,'" said Levien. "I didn't ask him to. I didn't have to."

Patton can reflexively pick up seemingly impossible things – like slim dimes and a credit card on a marble floor – as easily as other dogs retrieve a favorite tennis ball. But this 11-month-old chocolate lab isn't a regular treasured pet. He has been undergoing intense training since he was 10 weeks old to become a Hero Dog – a working companion for a veteran with injuries and disabilities. He'll be almost 2 ½ by the time he's ready to live alone alongside a veteran who has also received specialized dog training.

He is one of the first 10 dogs in the Hero Dogs program, which was created two years ago by Jennifer Lund, a local respected dog training expert and former research scientist with a background in electrical engineering.

The program is a unique one: its objective is to train dogs to serve the needs of seriously wounded soldiers returning home and adjusting to a different life as someone who is now an amputee, paralyzed, blind, hearing impaired, diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder or having a combination of disabilities.

"It was glaringly obvious there was a big unmet need," said Lund, who lives and trains the dogs in Brookeville, Maryland. Lund, who had previous experience training service dogs, noticed there wasn't a local organization that addressed the

specific needs of wounded veterans. With so many veterans receiving rehabilitation and ongoing treatment at veteran's hospitals in the Washington, D.C., area, she knew having dogs raised, trained and placed here would be a help to those who stayed local.

Her concern was that these veterans could apply to any number of organizations that train service dogs, but their extensive needs wouldn't be a fit for the few available dogs, they would have to travel to get a suitable dog, or wouldn't get special consideration.

"A local organization was missing and really needed," Lund said. "We all know they've made sacrifices on our behalf. This is a way to help these veterans gain some independence."

Hero Dogs is a non-profit organization and depends on the donations of suitable puppies, veterinary care, and corporate and personal sponsorships to raise and train a dog from pup-



Home of the Hero Dogs program

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pyhood to being capable of assisting a veteran in his or her home, free of charge.

Lund and others involved with the organization take every opportunity to show what their dogs can do, even from a very early age. They set up booths at local fairs, visit town events, welcome Girl Scout troops and have had a spot on MSNBC. With Hero Dogs driven by the generosity of others, getting the word out is crucial to its success.

“Everyone you talk to about what we’re doing says, ‘What a great idea!’ or ‘Who would deserve it more?’” Lund said. But the key is turning the voiced support into actual financial support. That’s proving more difficult for the fledgling group. Lund estimates the cost of raising and training a Hero Dog at \$30,000. “The big challenge is turning that enthusiasm into real results,” Lund said.

Ed Levien was one of those who saw a golden retriever at a Hero Dogs booth and applied for one of the more demanding jobs – being a puppy raiser. He and his wife went through an extensive application and interview process before Lund placed Patton – named for esteemed World War II Gen. George S. Patton – in his Bethesda home.

Levien was a longtime dog owner and had rescue dogs, but hardly considered himself an expert trainer. “I was just a pet owner who would have semi-trained dogs or wannabe trained dogs,” Levien said with a laugh. “In the beginning, I had no idea what I was doing.”

That’s where Lund and her expertise came in. Levien welcomed Patton into his home and agreed to have the energetic, enthusiastic puppy at his side 24 hours a day, seven days a week for about 15 months, and to diligently implement the training he and Patton received from Lund.

Levien and Patton went through puppy kindergarten with other, non-service dogs, before moving up to more advanced training. Patton had to learn to sit, stay, come, and wait for food just like the other canine students, but had to sit out playing games like tug-of-war.

“There are things that pets are allowed to do that Hero Dogs are not allowed to do,” Levien said, giving the tug-of-war example. “And there’s a reason for that. Remember that one of the biggest tasks a Hero Dog has to do is retrieve things, either close by or from afar, and hand them to a soldier. A dog can’t differentiate between what’s a game and what’s needed.”

Hero Dogs from an early age must demonstrate they won’t react around other people, in crowds, to noise, or to other dogs. If the puppy shows promise in those areas, is confident and willing to follow a human’s lead, then the puppy is a great candidate, Lund said.

These dogs must also be disciplined and consistently respond to commands. So far, Lund has chosen to use Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers because of their enthusiasm and temperament.

Lovers of these playful breeds know these dogs are highly trainable, but retain a puppy-like spirit for quite awhile. This can be challenging for a trainer, but those who know these dogs also know what always gets their attention – food.

Small pieces of kibble are the rewards during the learning process for the voice commands. With the puppy at his side at all times, Levien has the opportunity to consistently train and correct problems as they arise.

One challenge for Levien was honing the retriever’s hallmark skill – retrieving. While a pet willingly runs for a ball over and over, he may not necessarily give the ball back. That can’t be the case with a Hero Dog, who will have to fetch items like a phone, keys, books, and money and give them on command to the veteran.

“Patton doesn’t want to let go of his ball. He loves his ball. But he’s learning the faster he gives it back, the faster he can fetch it again,” Levien said. [next page ►](#)

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Maverick



Ed with Patton



Radar and Patton

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Veteran Col. Robert Atkinson with Hero Dog trainers.

Wearing his service dog vest, Patton has gone everywhere Levien goes. The dog has been trained to sit in the passenger footwell of the car, has ridden on the subway, learned to sit patiently under the table at a restaurant, and lay quietly behind Levien as he works at home.

Levien described a recent outing at a restaurant when a veteran sitting nearby asked about Patton, who was sitting obediently at Levien's feet. The soldier had lost his arm and had been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and had infant twin daughters.

He told Levien how he had been looking into getting a service dog and Levien encouraged him to look into Hero Dogs. "Between losing his arm and PTSD, for someone like him, coming home and trying to adjust, it's just horrible," Levien said.

Patton is now progressing to more advanced skills, like following multiple-step commands to take an item and bring it somewhere else, or recognizing if his veteran has fallen out of his wheelchair and has to help the veteran get back up.

"The Hero Dogs have to do everything for these wounded soldiers. If you have a double or triple amputee, there's not a lot a soldier can do for himself, but the Hero Dog can," Levien said.

Lund designed the training program so the dogs can be taken through basic obedience to learning specific skills for the veterans they're matched with. She is working with the three oldest dogs in her home now that they've graduated from living with their puppy raisers. The organization has leased buildings for training near her home, and the directors are assessing applications now to find the best fit for the first group of dogs and veterans in need.

The physical needs can range from assisting an amputee who uses a wheelchair to being alert to the emotional needs of a veteran with PTSD who may experience panic attacks.

"A lot of it is personality matching," Lund explained. "Some people want the dog to be a little more social. Some want a dog



who is more aloof and doesn't attract attention."

Of the 42 applications Hero Dogs has sent out, seven have been returned. Veterans must submit a written application, medical records, and references from doctors and caretakers. "It's a fairly intensive process," Lund said.

Once the dog is matched with a veteran, the two will undergo four to six months of training so the dog can respond to a veteran's particular needs. Depending on how active the veteran is, the training will include household tasks as well as how to help at work, out shopping, on the subway, and being in public in general.

The group's five-year goal is to place about 12 dogs a year, which means about 30 dogs will be in various stages of training at any time, Lund said.

To make this happen, Hero Dogs needs to continue to raise more money and bring in more volunteers, including some willing to take over more of the administrative end of the organization so Lund can spend more time doing what she does and loves best – training the dogs. More puppy raisers also would mean more dogs undergoing to first phase of training.

"Puppy raising – that's just going way above and beyond. They're giving more than a year of their lives. They're opening up their homes and their hearts," Lund said. "The special people who do that is a miracle in and of itself."

Levien jokes that he's pretending his time with Patton isn't coming to end. While he has another dog, he'll miss the constant companionship and bond he has developed with the dog he has seen grow from a 10-week-old playful ball of fur to a mature dog capable of taking care of the complicated needs of a disabled veterans. "The older he gets, the more he can do," Levien said. "And I can see how much he can help someone." 🐾

Karyn Spellman Ash is a freelance writer based in Reisterstown, Md., and a longtime owner of chocolate labs, including year-old, semi-trained Harley.