



## Purple Hearts

Healing veterans  
with unconditional love

BY MICHAEL A. MILLER

What would you do with \$10,000, \$20,000, or even \$60,000? Would you buy a shiny new sports car or elope on your dream vacation? How about buying a service dog? The latter may surprise you, but veterans suffering with PTSD or traumatic brain injury (TBI) often have to fork over these exorbitant sums of money to obtain the canine aide they need to heal and reintegrate into society.

Service dogs are usually obtained from breeders and handled from puppyhood to adulthood by multiple trainers for each phase of their training. This, coupled with the costs of housing, feeding, shots, and veterinary care all factor into the steep price of service animals. This was a barrier to symptom relief for Jim Stanek, who returned from his third tour in Iraq with PTSD and TBI.

After 9 months of conventional treatment, Jim realized he found the most solace in the presence of rescue dogs. After being rejected or unable to afford a dog from multiple organizations, he and his wife knew something had to be done. They founded Paws and Stripes in 2010, a nonprofit organization in New Mexico providing free service dogs to wounded military veterans with PTSD or TBI. The organization is funded through generous grants and the good will of kind benefactors, so the veterans who enroll never pay a cent of the \$6,300 course.

"We help veterans so they can live the full and rich lives they deserve," said Shawn Bacoccini, director of development at Paws and Stripes. "We have created a program built around not only training teams, but also assisting with reintegration coupled with mental health support."

The training model at Paws and Stripes is unique and refreshing. Instead of meeting a fully trained dog for the first time, veterans bond and grow with their canine pals throughout the program. "We begin by focusing on the bond between the veteran and dog, then from there, the new 'team' trains for up to a year," said Bacoccini.

After an initial assessment of a veteran's specific needs, they are

introduced to a small band of floppy-eared, tail-wagging dogs selected from local animal shelters. The veteran is able to choose the one with which they have the strongest bond. "By training them as teams," Bacoccini said, "we not only see the bond between veteran and dog deepen as time passes, but it also facilitates the regeneration and healing of both the veteran and the dog throughout the program."

Bacoccini said challenges do crop up occasionally with shelter dogs, but not all dogs end up in shelters because they are problematic. Sometimes a pet owner moves or no longer has the time to care for their animal, or an animal exhibits too much excitement or eats too much furniture for a particular owner's satisfaction. Paws and Stripes dogs come from local New Mexico shelters like Santa Fe Animal Shelter, Watermelon Ranch, and Animal Welfare, and these lucky pooches are guaranteed a forever home upon their enrollment in the program. Upon their completion, they earn the full protection and rights granted by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

During the 10- to 12-month program, hard-working veterans complete at least 15 hours of class work, volunteer hours, and homework each week. The cost of the course covers equipment, individual and group training, mental health counseling from licensed clinicians, education after graduation, and psyche-educational courses that teach veterans and their families about their new life with a service dog.

Just how might life change for a graduate? Paws and Stripes dogs are trained to assist in a variety of ways including waking their partners from nightmares, reminding them to take medications, staying alert to pain levels of their human companions, and guiding them through a plethora of mobility challenges.

After rescuing more than 90 dogs from shelters and providing services to more than 100 veterans and their families, the culmination of their efforts has certainly generated praise from its graduates. "I feel alive and able to function every day and look forward to waking up knowing I have a life again and my service [dog] to help me enjoy it," said one graduate. "I get out in public during the day with my dog instead of waiting until 3 a.m. to grocery shop. I am able to attend events with friends instead of staying home missing out," said another.

If you choose to donate to this noble pursuit of happiness for those who defend our country, consider planning a fundraiser in your area, donating an old vehicle or making an online donation at [pawsandstripes.com](http://pawsandstripes.com). 