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Dogs are leading California Veterans out of the darkness

Pets and Vets program at Tony La Russa's ARF is making a difference in the lives of veterans who are matched with service dogs.

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Editor's note: This is the third story of a five-part series on the Pets and Vets program at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek. Today's installment looks at how these rescue dogs have changed veterans' lives.

For Maddy Gibson, life is hazily divided between the darkness and the light, the loneliness and the comfort, the fear and the peace. The demarcation between the halves is Lady, a 5-year-old Basenji mix with a fierce curiosity for everything, but a shyness around other dogs. Lady, a rescue, is Gibson's service dog, and the

touchstone that allows Gibson to venture out into a world that once seemed too harsh.

"She's changed my life so much," says Gibson, a 38-year-old Navy veteran. "Before, I didn't get out of bed much. I didn't go out much. To me, the world was terrible and humans were awful."

Gibson and Lady are graduates of the Pets and Vets service dog program offered by Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek. The training connects veterans with rescued dogs that have passed testing to become service animals. The vets and their dogs go through several months of training, with the

vets learning to work with their animals and the dogs learning how to support their veterans.

Gibson, a native Texan who lives in Oakland now, joined the Navy in 2006 and spent six years in the service working as a sonar technician on destroyers. During her time, she had three deployments — two in the Mediterranean and one working in a counter-drug operation in Central and South America.

Part of the reason she enlisted was to see the world — and she did — but after leaving the Navy, her world shrank to a single room. "There were a lot of things I wanted to do," she says, "but I just couldn't. I stayed in a bad relationship; I stayed inside."

The stress of what her experiences in the military, coupled with what she calls being "technically homeless" took a devastating toll on her mental health. Diagnosed with PTSD and battling severe depression, she began isolating herself, walling herself away from all contact.

During counseling with the Veterans Administration, one therapist suggested she get a service dog.

Gibson recognizes the difference in herself. Where once she struggled to even go to the grocery store, now she packs up Lady and explores dog parks and other new areas and towns. Lady, Gibson says, is "kind of like a social lubricant. I can talk to human beings again and that's not a bad



Veteran Madeline Gibson and Lady, a 5-year-old basenji mix, pose for a photograph at Heather Farm Park in Walnut Creek, Calif., on Wednesday, June 20, 2018. Gibson and Lady have completed service dog training through the Pets and Vets program at the Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group)

thing.”

Gibson also has found strength in knowing that Lady is watching out for her. Lady is trained to sense anxiety and move to Gibson’s side, get into her lap or lie across her chest, maneuvers that calm and reassure. While Lady helps Gibson interact with people, she also keeps them at a safe distance. When she senses Gibson is uneasy, the dog creates a perimeter around Gibson.

“She watches my back,” Gibson says, “so no one can sneak up behind me.”

Having an active partner — a battle buddy — is an important part of having a service dog for these veterans. Cliff Waugaman, 34, for example, had a lot of trouble after his 8-month deployment in Iraq in 2006. Waugaman, a Navy corpsman attached to a Marine battalion, returned home a different person. Even with therapy and medications, he struggled until a therapist recommended the ARF program.

“It’s staggering, the difference in me,” he says. “I wish all vets could get into this program or one like it.”

Like many vets with PTSD, Waugaman says he tended to isolate himself, but with his dog, Django, a boxer-bulldog mix, he feels safe “and that’s the biggest thing. He calms me.” Django, who Waugaman describes as a “soft soul,” is trained to check every corner of Waugaman’s home, making sure there is no danger. Waugaman uses the word “safe” a lot when describing Django’s job. He says the dog not only keeps him safe, but also his 6-year-old son, when he visits. Django’s presence makes Waugaman feel protected and more at ease.

It’s a story repeated by all these vets with service dogs. That feeling of safety and support is key. Mackenzie, a bull terrier-pit bull mix, is the only reason Samuel Phillips, 32, can leave his home. “Before her,” Phillips says, “I



Veteran Clifford Waugaman, 34, of Tracy, hugs his dog Django, 5, at Tony La Russa’s Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek, Calif., on Monday, June 25, 2018. Waugaman served as a U.S. Navy corpsman for eight months in Iraq in 2006. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

was living with my parents and wouldn’t leave the house. When I got (Mackenzie), she obviously has to go to the bathroom, so that got me out twice a day.”

It was a start. And while Phillips still spends time in his parents’ Dublin home, with Mackenzie, he found the courage to move out on his own and get out more often. “I’ve been going out to the spots I used to go to as a kid,” says Phillips, an ex-Marine who was deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. “She’s the reason why I went back, why I’m able to go to those places. They bring back memories — good memories, for a change.” Phillips grew up in Hayward and joined the Marines at age 21, becoming a light armor reconnaissance crewman. For two years, he drove an 8-wheel, all-terrain vehicle with a turret on top; the next two, he was a gunner. None of the vets like to speak about the details of their service, the sights and sounds and experiences, but the pain is visible in their faces and it eases noticeably when they speak of their service dogs and reach down to stroke their fur.

Phillips had to conquer a second fear in getting Mackenzie: He had been bitten in the face by

a Rottweiler when he was a child. But Mackenzie helped immeasurably. It’s hard to look at that big lovable mug and not see the good there.

“Just having something that can love you back makes a difference,” Phillips says.

At ARF, the Pets and Vets program is all about rescuing lives on both ends of the leash, both veteran and rescue dog. But the work Django has done in helping Waugaman has had a ripple effect, too. Waugaman has started working with a Stockton-based nonprofit veterans group, Tactical Patients, with a mission of stopping the plague of veteran suicides. The group has started giving dogs to vets, and Waugaman is hopeful the program can expand to include training.

With isolation, Waugaman says, “we lose that part of us that is able to get out and talk to each other.” Pets and Vets and Tactical Patients open those doors. “We have a safe place where we can get together and feel better.”

Waugaman, Gibson and Phillips credit their dogs — and ARF’s Pets and Vets program — with making that difference in their lives.

“Django goes everywhere with me,” Waugaman says. “He’s why I’m still alive.”