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Rescue me: Pets and vets are rescuing each other through Bay Area program

Unique program of having veterans train their own service animals — dogs rescued from shelters — is saving lives on both ends of the leash.

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Editor's note: This is the first of a five-part series about the Pets and Vets program offered by Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek, which helps veterans with PTSD train rescue dogs to become their service animals. Upcoming segments include how dogs are chosen and how vets are paired with them.

On a recent Friday afternoon, a quartet of veterans and their dogs make clockwise and counter-clockwise circles around a grassy area, while trainer Daniel Kimbrell observes.

New Pet Pal Logo "Good service-dog pass," Kimbrell shouts as two dogs meet on their opposite paths. They give each other a quick nose bump and move on. "Don't forget to reward them."

Kimbrell is the trainer for Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation's Pets and Vets, a groundbreaking program that pairs rescue dogs with military veterans who learn to train their own service animals.

There's no debate on who is rescuing whom. It's both dog and veteran.

"We're taking an animal off death row," says Elena Bicker, executive director of Walnut Creek-based ARF, "and matching it with a veteran who is struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. It changes both their lives."

Pets and Vets grew out of ARF founder Tony La Russa's desire to do something for veterans. Remembering how Vietnam veterans were treated



Michael Spain, of Stockton, rewards his dog Harvey with a kiss during a training session at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek, Calif., on Saturday, May 5, 2018. Spain, who served in the Navy, is participating in the Pet and Vets program. Pets and Vets is a program that was started in 2011 to match U.S. veterans with emotional support animals to help them cope with PTSD, anxiety, depression and other issues when they return to civilian life. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

when they returned home in the 1960s, La Russa urged his staff to find a way to give back to the vets returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. They began making regular visits to Veterans Affairs hospitals in Martinez and Livermore to offer free pet care for vets' animals. The vets' stories about how much their pets helped them recover from the fog of war inspired the Pets and Vets program.

"We already knew what the magic of an animal can do," Bicker says.

"Pairing them with vets was a natural."

The decades-long war in the Middle East has taken a significant toll on service men and women. Up to 500,000 military men and women are diagnosed each year with PTSD, a crippling condition that can destroy not only the veteran but his or her family.

Kimbrell can attest to that. He was an Army paratrooper, but when

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he returned to the U.S. in 2003, after a five-month deployment, he was haunted by his time in Afghanistan. Nightmares destroyed his sleep, leaving him afraid to close his eyes. He'd fight back by staying awake for two days at a time.

When he was due to be redeployed in 2005, he finally saw a doctor, who diagnosed PTSD. Instead of relieving Kimbrell's concerns, the diagnosis made him feel weak. He didn't think he'd seen enough to warrant having PTSD.

After his discharge, Kimbrell took up martial arts as a way to distract himself from his thoughts and memories. It worked for a while. But often he would train so hard, he would injure himself, and when he was unable to work out, his mind was free to wander places Kimbrell didn't want it to go.

Then he got a dog, a lovable corgi named Tyler. The dog became everything to Kimbrell, who found that Tyler's unconditional love and support, as well as companionship, helped keep the nightmares at bay. Tyler had become what Kimbrell perhaps missed the most — a battle buddy, a partner who was always with him.

It was Kimbrell's doctor who first noticed the difference: When Kimbrell talked about his dog, he was a different person. The doctor suggested Kimbrell have Tyler trained as a service dog.

Kimbrell says he expected his life's work to "involve moving heavy things." Instead, he opened his own dog-training business and became a certified service-dog trainer. Kimbrell joined ARF two years ago. He is convinced of the importance of having vets train their own dogs, rather than getting one already trained. There are important things to learn and a strong bond to build. Training a dog, Kimbrell says, teaches you that force doesn't work, so you learn ways around it.

"I loved the military," Kimbrell says, "but the mindset there was to crush everything, break through, win at all costs. But out here, you may not need to beat through. You only need to get what you need and move on."

And learning to problem solve for pets teaches people to problem solve for themselves, Kimbrell says.



Trainer Danny Kimbrell observes veterans during a training program called Pets and Vets at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek, Calif. on Thursday, Nov. 3, 2016.

In the military, soldiers are assigned a battle buddy — someone they can count on to watch out for them in battle, to lay down their lives for them, if necessary, and who expect the same in return. When they come home, not having that person can be isolating and add to their stress. Family and friends can't fill that tremendous void, but the dogs can. These dogs become furry battle buddies, always at their side and ready to listen, distract and provide them with unconditional love and support.

Bicker recalls one poignant moment when a vet drove all the way from Stockton to get his service dog, a stray with a surgically repaired leg that had, like the veteran, been through its own sort of war. As the man got into the car, he loaded the dog in the rear seat, telling the dog that he never let anyone ride behind him, but knew he could trust his dog. "You have my back," he said.

Rudy Dubord is learning all those things with his service dog-in-training, Layla, a mixed pit bull who is as mellow as a well-aged hound dog. Dubord, who grew up in Santa Clara, served four years in the Marines, but when his tour of duty was up, he struggled with depression, anxiety and anger management. Three months ago, he got Layla and began training.

"She cheered me up," Dubord says. "She's really helped with my depression and anxiety. She's someone to talk to."

Dubord, 28, travels from his Oakdale home to Livermore on Fridays for group therapy, then to Walnut Creek for service-dog training. It's a long journey that might not be possible without Layla's calming presence. Dubord says he tends toward road rage, but Layla helps him keep his anger in check.

"I can't really put in words how amazing this is," Dubord says. "Just having a pet is great, but having a service dog and being able to interact with people, go where I want. It's just hard to explain. It's knowing I have the ability to take care of this."

Layla recently passed her practical exam for basic obedience. She eventually will learn how to recognize Dubord's anxiety, something she already is keyed into, and how to defuse it.

Kimbrell finds joy and satisfaction in seeing both the pets and the vets progress. Some days, he says, they struggle with commands; the vet doesn't understand how to get the dog to obey. The next week, both dog and owner perform that same task perfectly.

"It's those a-ha moments," Kimbrell says, "when you know they get it and now they just have to work more on it, but they get it. They've got it. Those are the moments that make me feel amazing."

Kimbrell says his job is done when they don't need him anymore, but there are plenty of men and women — women accounted for 18 percent of the 97 vets who have completed service-dog training since 2015 — who still need help, and plenty of dogs, too.

Dubord tells everyone he can about the program. If it was up to him, he says, there would be hundreds of programs just like this throughout the country.

ARF would like that, too. The foundation works closely with the VA, which recommends vets check out the program. The dream, Bicker says, is to eventually re-create Pets and Vets in other parts of the country, but that will take time.

For now, it's about one vet, one dog and two saved lives.