

Dogs Healing Veterans, Veterans Saving Dog

by Jill Hedgecock

They come from different backgrounds, they served our country in different ways, but these military veterans have one thing in common: their faces light up when they speak about the service dogs they acquired as part of Tony LaRussa's Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF)'s Pets for Vets Program. Jon Belanger, a combat veteran who served in the Navy during Desert Storm and his black Labrador mix, Skyler, have been in the program for five months. Belanger says the whole program has been therapeutic. Ethan Shattuck who served in Iraq for 10 years suffers from agoraphobia—a fear of leaving home. He says that his one-year-old retriever-pit bull mix, Finnegan has changed everything. Having the responsibility of a dog not only forces him to go outside to walk his dog, but he has to venture from his house to come to the ARF training classes.

"Finnegan is a goofball that helps me remember how to smile and laugh," Ethan says, "I've never had a better dog."

The Pets for Vets Program, which is offered free of charge, requires the veterans to participate in seven weeks of basic dog training, seven weeks of intermediate training, seven weeks of Canine Good Citizenship training and 7 to 14 weeks of service skills and public access interactions. The program even includes navigating their dogs through a grocery store. After this nearly yearlong formal training concludes, the veterans are required to continue with follow-up training sessions.

"Watching the transformation of stray to well-behaved dogs and the bond that develops between the veterans and dogs is her favorite part of the program," says Merritt Rollins, the Program Manager.

During a training session on October 6, Danny Kimbrell, the Pets for Vets dog trainer, guided the veterans through several service skills. Many veterans suffer from hypervigilance, a condition that can escalate into a panic attack, especially in crowds. To alleviate the symptoms, Danny showed the veterans how to create a canine barrier between the public and themselves. To achieve this, the dogs are trained to precede their owner through doorways and grocery aisles. Through the use of clickers and food rewards, Belanger and Shattuck quickly taught Skyler and Finnegan this new skill.

Another common

symptom of Post Traumatic Source Disorder (PTSD) that these pets can help veterans deal with is overstimulation. Because dogs are known to be a calming influence, the dogs are taught to touch their handler when their owner's heart rate starts to increase. To start the training process, the veterans were asked to bob a knee as a signal of stress, then invite the dog to jump up onto their lap. The goal is to eventually have the dog recognize early cues that a veteran's are on the verge of an episode of over-stimulation:

Danny Kimbrell who served in the 82nd Airborne in Afghanistan, is an essentially self-taught dog trainer after working with Berkeley Humane to train a support dog for himself. He stepped in to fill a need when he discovered that there were no official programs in service dog training.

It's not all work and no play for these dogs. Time is reserved after the formal training for the service dogs is complete to interact with their fellow service animals. Skyler and Finnegan's joy was evident as they romped around the room chasing each other.

On September 9, (the date the City of Walnut Creek declared Pets for Vets Day)

dog trainer Danny Kimbrell and Program Manager Merritt Rollins achieved a milestone when eight veterans graduated from the first Pets for Vets assistance dog program. Jon and Skyler and Ethan and Finnegan will soon join the ranks of Pets for Vets graduates. On that day, their faces will no doubt light up the room.

ARF's Pets for Vets Program participants must be veterans of the United States Military serving after 1990 and must meet other requirements such as receiving ongoing treatment for service-related emotional trauma within Contra Costa or Alameda Counties, and reside within a 30-mile radius of ARF's headquarters located in Walnut Creek, CA. Veterans in inpatient housing are not eligible. To apply veterans should review the requirements and fill out an application. For more information, visit <https://www.arflife.org/pets-for-vets> or call (925) 256-1ARF (1273) and ask for Merritt Rollins.

*Dog Trainer Danny Kimbrell instructs Ethan Shattuck on handling Finnegan.
-Photos Courtesy of Diane Walsh*

