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Purina Dog Chow launches Service Dog Salute campaign



Suzanne Garofalo | Sep. 19, 2018 | Updated: Sep. 19, 2018 6:14 pm

Brandon and Max are in basic training. At their “base,” they run through drills and demonstrate discipline in following the routine. Brandon knows his buddy has his back – even if that buddy is walking their journey on four legs.

Brandon Gray is an Army veteran born in Houston and raised in the Sugar Land/Richmond area. Maximus is a 3-year-old German Shepherd-Siberian Husky mix born and raised in California. The mission: to provide each other with stability and companionship – and to ease Gray’s post-traumatic stress.

“He allows me to relax enough to get out of the house,” Gray says. “When he’s out with me, it’s even better.”

Their partnership – and more than 100 others like it – comes courtesy of retired Major League Baseball player and manager Tony La Russa and his Walnut Creek, Calif.-based Animal Rescue Foundation. ARF’s Pets and Vets program matches rescue dogs with veterans experiencing PTSD and other



Houston native Brandon Gray, who has PTSD and other challenges after two tours in Iraq as an Army cavalry scout, got Maximus from Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek, Calif.

challenges, then guides veterans through 10 months of training their dogs themselves to become skilled service animals.

Now Purina Dog Chow is working to help ARF grow – and anyone can

pitch in.

September is National Service Dog Month, and through Veterans Day, Nov. 11, the brand will make a donation to ARF with every purchase of specially marked bags of food,

Dog Chow Service Dog Salute campaign

The donation goal is \$500,000. So far, the campaign has raised \$163,000 from sales of Complete Adult with Chicken and \$36,000 from video shares. Find the videos at DogChow.com/Service.

Did you know?

In 1926, Purina’s founder, William Danforth, named the company’s first dog food “Dog Chow” as a nod to the chow lines that fed American service members during World War I.

up to \$250,000. Additionally, Dog Chow partnered with BuzzFeed on compelling stories of how ARF is “turning a leash into a lifeline” for both rescue dogs and veterans. For each unique video share, Dog Chow donates \$1 to ARF, up to another \$250,000.

“Dog Chow has a long history of helping our military,” company representative Emily Goldkamp says.

Merritt Rollins, ARF’s Pets and Vets program manager, says other programs can take two to five years to pair a veteran with a dog that can cost \$10,000 or more. (Closer to home, the Fort Bend Veterans Companion Dog Program, the Austin Dog Alliance’s Hounds for Heroes and DFW Canines for Veterans offer similar veteran-training programs that provide the dog).

ARF generally takes four to six months to get an emotional support pet to a veteran, who then starts training at ARF’s facility. The

approach not only strengthens bonds between human and canine but establishes a sense of community among veterans in the classes, according to Rollins.

“They start to feel a bit of an identity again,” she says.

Rigorous temperament testing goes into selecting appropriate rescue dogs, Rollins adds. Ideally, “they are middle of the road” – not super-excitable but want to play. And they are “bomb proof” – that is, not easily startled.

Maximus fits the bill. At 108 pounds, he’s physically a good match for the 6-foot-2-inch, 250-pound Gray. Despite his size, the dog is “best friends” with Gray’s 7-year-old son.

As a cavalry scout with the 82nd Airborne Division during tours in Iraq in 2007 and ’09, Gray jumped out of C-130s and other planes and performed reconnaissance on enemy-troop movements: “It was

boots on the ground, on the front lines looking for high-value targets,” he recalls. Though his second deployment included humanitarian work, such as digging water wells, “ours was one of the last units to get in a major conflict ... in Baghdad.”

Gray saw children blown up. He felt “the stressors of war. The stressors of death all around you. Hopelessness. Helplessness. Not being able to help the citizens of Iraq.”

In addition to PTSD, the 35-year-old copes with knee, back, shoulder and neck injuries, insomnia and the memory loss and trouble concentrating that come from traumatic brain injury. He says it takes him six hours to read 20 pages and that it’s hard to retain what he just read.

But thanks to ARF, Gray manages better these days. The nonprofit covers the cost of Maximus’ food, veterinarian bills for his allergies and more.

“They’re making it very easy to focus on getting better,” says Gray, who now lives in Martinez, Calif., and is pursuing a master’s degree from John F. Kennedy University in performance psychology.

At last week’s ARF training, Max, as Gray calls him, was learning to notice Gray’s anxiety. “When my leg is shaking, he gets on my lap to get me out of the cycle.”

Gray, who didn’t grow up with dogs, says Max can read him: “He’ll lick me or make me play. We’re in tune with each other.”

Max definitely shows his husky side: “He talks all the time. ... He’s super-smart and silly,” Gray says with a chuckle.

Without him, “it wouldn’t be good. He calms me down. I look forward to seeing my dog.”



Maximus is a 3-year-old German Shepherd/Siberian Husky mix that Animal Rescue Foundation matched with Houston native Brandon Gray, an Army veteran who needs assistance. ARF has paired over 100 rescue dogs with veterans.