

# PATRIOT PAWS

WE SALUTE A GREAT ORGANIZATION



Even the ordinary days are extraordinary in the life of Dustin Deweerd with his companion, Gunny. "I want people to know that Patriot PAWS is the real deal. They are quite possibly one of the best organizations I have ever dealt with. They help rehabilitate so many people, from the inmates who train the dogs to the veterans who receive them—then the dog itself gets paired with a perfect owner. It's a win-win for everyone. Patriot PAWS is literally saving lives with this program."

**THE ORGANIZATION** | Patriot PAWS trains and provides service dogs of the highest quality for veterans who suffer from mobility disabilities as well as issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which presents no outward physical limitations. Its founder, Lori Stevens, is a Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT), and Karen Pryor Academy (KPA) graduate with over 20 years of experience. Lori has worked and volunteered for several dog-training organizations, including Lone Star Assistance Dog Service and Texas Hearing and Service Dogs. While she found this work rewarding, her true passion is training service dogs to assist disabled veterans.

The dogs help restore the physical and emotional independence of the veterans. Services performed by each dog depend on the needs of the

owner. Some services provided by the dogs to assist disabled veterans in accomplishing daily tasks that would otherwise be difficult or impossible are:

- Get help in emergencies
- Recognize and avert PTSD episodes
- Pick up and retrieve items
- Open and close doors
- Pull wheelchairs
- Provide bracing to stand, walk and sit down
- Help with chores, such as laundry
- Take off shoes and socks

Training begins when pups are 6-12 weeks old and continues for 18-24 months. Puppy raisers help train dogs and socialize them after learning the basics in the prison program. Staff trainers from Patriot PAWS work on behavioral issues and specialized training requests made by the veterans who will receive a dog.

Bonnie Hoard is a staff member who works with the dogs daily. "The work we're doing with these dogs is basically saving lives, marriages and recreating bonds with daddies and kids. PTSD causes isolation. Many of the people who suffer from PTSD simply push everyone away. It can be really devastating. When the dogs are placed with their veteran, most of those issues subside," said Bonnie. The program also addresses a number of needs in the community. Disabled veterans regain



An organization that not only supports our honored veterans, but also serves facets of our community in the process.

lost independence and emotional stability. Prison inmates, who have an active part in training the service dogs, have the opportunity to learn a new vocation while learning the importance of responsibility and how it feels to be needed. They also experience the feeling of giving back to society while incarcerated. Finally, the rescue and shelter dogs are given a new lease on life and will help to change people's lives. All of this truly creates a win, win, win situation for all involved.

**THE INMATES** | Patriot PAWS and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) entered into a partnership to provide an opportunity for inmates at the Christina Melton Crain Unit and the Dr. Lane Murray Unit in Gatesville, Texas, to volunteer and assist in the training of service dogs. The partnership is intended to provide the inmates a job while serving their sentence, learning a career trade and giving back to the community. "I remember one day I was tending to a medical issue while at the unit in Gatesville and I saw some offenders coming down

the hall with dogs. You just don't see this in a prison. We normally don't have human or animal touch in prison. I wanted to get on the floor to hug these dogs! I asked about the program and was informed it was Patriot PAWS. I then made it my mission to become a part of this program. I wrote letter after letter to anyone who would listen pleading my case to be a part of the program," said AJ Blanchette, former offender who is now on staff at Patriot PAWS.

"I spent my entire life being selfish and self-centered, due to various reasons, and it was time for me to do something for someone other than myself. It's finally my turn to do something right by society," said AJ. Prisoners are not allowed to participate in the program unless they have a record of six months, 'case free,' which means having no major disciplinary issues. Once in the program you must remain case free. The program clearly has to be a priority for the ladies. "What struck me most when I first began to participate in the program was the inspiration the

other ladies provided. You can literally see the change in them on the outside. They were visibly so different compared to the general population of the prisoners. If it changes you like that in prison, of course you're going to take that with you when you leave," said AJ.

The inmates are trained and supervised by Lori and her professional staff and final customization of the service dogs is done at the Patriot PAWS training facility in Rockwall. In addition, Lori and her staff train foster parents that commit to initial care and working with the dogs in their homes.

When the prison program training is complete and it comes time for the offenders to say goodbye to the dogs, it's not as sad as you might imagine. "Oh, there are tears alright," said AJ. "But the tears are not because you're losing something—the tears are joyful because you're giving something. It's an honor and a privilege to see the life we help renew and the pain associated with saying goodbye to the dog just melts away." (continued)

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### THE VETERANS AND THEIR DOGS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reports that the current number of active duty and veterans who commit suicide per day is 22. The rate is up four per day from its previous study which indicated 18 committed suicide per day. Many of them were men ages 30-50, basically in the prime of their lives. The number may even be higher because suicides often go unreported as the cause of death due to the stigma.

"After I entered the prison program, I learned how our veterans sacrificed so much for us that we had all thrown away," said AJ. "We, as offenders, had so callously thrown away our freedoms and these veterans had their freedoms taken away—either in limbs, or by injuries or emotional scars, etc. It made me say, 'Shame on me,' and it made me want to do right by society."

Dustin first learned about Patriot PAWS through a counselor at the VA in Dallas. He and his dog, Gunny, were placed together in May 2013 (photo p.56). "Gunny assists me in many ways. He has helped reduce my blood pressure and anxiety. He helps me sleep and on occasion has awoken me from terrible nightmares. For me, it is more the companionship and the keeping my mind off things that helps daily. Gunny is a great stress reliever. Dustin said if asked by the people closest to him, they say that Gunny has changed his life. "I can tell a real difference," he said. "I have been told that I am calmer now and I believe he has changed my life for the better. I feel like I can finally relax with Gunny around." According to Dustin, Patriot PAWS is the real deal. "Patriot PAWS is helping to save many lives with this program. But unfortunately, there are still so many people still on the waiting list who need the help of a service dog."

SL VISITED WITH PATRIOT PAWS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Q: How do you match dogs to people? What is involved? A: At Patriot PAWS, we let the dog choose the person rather than the other way around. Bonding is a very important part of the matching

process and one we pay particular attention to. During our 10-day placement period where the veteran is taught how to work with service dogs, the first four days are spent with each one working with multiple dogs that are all trained the same way and ready to be placed. We rotate the dogs and veterans through about five behavior cues a day and watch to see how the dogs and people act together. Bonds just naturally begin to appear very early and we watch for consistency. We will see things like eye contact, approachability between the two, and a real focus on one another. We have even had things happen, such as a PTSD attack during training, and watched a dog break away from his current handler and run to the veteran in distress to help. Naturally, following that event, those two were paired for life.

Q: Is one dog assigned to one inmate? Or how does that part of the program work? A: The inmates live in a dormitory all together. Each bunk has a kennel beside it and the women all have one dog assigned to them at a time. The training teams work in the gym during the day with one of our staff trainers teaching them the science of training service dogs. The inmates get school credits for this privilege. When the dogs are moved from the prison portion of the program, they go to a puppy raiser's home for socialization and further training. We have over 40 puppy raisers who are volunteers. They bring our dogs into their homes and work places for the socialization process since, in prison, the dogs do not get to socialize in public.

Q: How much time does the dog spend in the prison program? A: It varies, but usually about three to four months on the unit as puppies. The dogs stay with their handler 24-7 for varying periods of time. After socialization, they may go back on the unit again for "boot camp" closer to their placement time, but the normal period is around three to four months.

Q: Would you say there is a greater need for PTSD assistance, or physical injury assistance? A: PTSD is prevalent across the board. Out of the 90 veterans on our waiting list, which is at about two years now, only 10 veterans do not list PTSD as an issue. Fifty-seven veterans list mobility and PTSD together, and 23 veterans present PTSD as their primary concern. To address this matter, we are working on a PTSD Program where dogs could be trained without the mobility behaviors in less time, with a shorter placement period for the service dog/veteran team and hopefully reduce the waiting list for that group of veterans.

Q: How much does it cost to train one dog? A: We do not place a dog younger than 1 1/2 years. Training costs for one dog is approximately \$20,000 to \$30,000 so donations and volunteers are crucial.

Q: Who should apply for a service dog? A: Any disabled American Veteran with mobility and/or PTSD issues can apply for a Patriot PAWS Service

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Dog. Once an application is accepted, an interview will be conducted and every attempt will be made to find a compatible match.

**Q:** How do you get the pups that participate in the program? **A:** We get our pups from a variety of places. We have some breeders that kindly donate their litters to us. On occasion we buy pups from breeders. We're also proud to adopt some shelter pups. We partner with Dallas Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of Texas (*SPCA*); in fact we have one shelter pup that's just about to graduate!

**Q:** How can our readers get involved? **A:** Patriot PAWS is implementing a new volunteer program at this time. As our organization continues to grow, we depend more and more upon those willing to help in a volunteer capacity. We have divided it into categories to clarify the ways in which volunteers can help. The categories are:

- Office Assistants
- Trainer's Assistants
- Special Events and Fundraisers
- PAWS Ambassadors
- Kid's Play and Summer Play
- Committed Junior Trainer's Assistants

Additionally, we have a separate group of volunteer puppy raisers who help with the socialization and training of our service dogs and a weekend group who volunteer to be loving dog sitters over the weekend when necessary. Anyone interested can find information at [www.patriotpaws.org](http://www.patriotpaws.org) or call the office at (972) 772-3282.

**UPCOMING FUNDRAISERS** | Patriot PAWS main fundraiser is the annual golf tournament hosted by The Dallas Assembly of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew. The tournament is Tuesday, June 3, 2014, at Canyon Creek Country Club in Richardson, Texas. Registration time is 11:30am. Lunch, dinner, cart, driving and putting ranges, prizes and awards are included in the price of \$125 per golfer. A special thanks to In-n-Out Burger for sponsoring lunch. Sponsors of all kinds are still needed. Sponsorships range from Hole/Tee Sponsor at \$200 all the way up to Platinum Sponsor at \$5,000. All of the profits will be donated to Patriot PAWS to sponsor training for one dog for its full two-year tenure, the cost of about \$27,000.

Patriot PAWS was chosen as the 2014 Hunting Art Prize Charity (*for more go to HuntingArtPrize.com*) out of Houston, Texas. The annual Hunting Art Prize is open to Texas artists who are 18 years of age or older. Its \$50,000 award is historically the most generous annual award in North America for painting and drawing. Each year, Hunting selects one well-deserving Texas-based nonprofit to receive a donation on behalf of the competition. The gift includes a direct donation as well as a contribution from Hunting that matches the dollars generated from finalists who sell their art at the annual Hunting Art Prize gala.



**CONTINUED COMMITMENT** | The continued commitment from Patriot PAWS is to work with the matched veterans and dogs as they learn to work together as a team. "When a veteran gets a service dog from Patriot PAWS they become part of our family. We stay in touch regularly, we tweak training as necessary and answer questions and concerns any time. We want to continue this relationship for the life of their service dog as well as any future service dogs," said Lori.

"To help with keeping our commitment, we will open a capital campaign soon to begin fundraising for a larger facility. We are at maximum capacity at our current facility. In order to get the waiting list down and more veterans served, we need a facility large enough to handle more dogs and trainers," said Lori. Patriot PAWS is a real win/win situation for so many people.

Not only does it give offenders true skills, it gives veterans their lives back and on occasion it also gives ex-offenders jobs after prison. "I began contacting Lori before I ever left prison asking if I could remain a part of the program. Getting released is emotional on many levels. You're excited, but you're scared and nervous about how to socially mingle with society again. The most important thing right off the bat is to find a job. I swung by the Rockwall office one day just to say hello to the group and thank them for all they'd done for me. I remember they happened to be hiring a receptionist. Lori looked at her team and said, 'Why don't we hire her?'"

"Well of course I couldn't keep my hands off the dogs. I was never at my desk, but I was always answering the phone. I had a cordless phone I kept in my pocket so I had one hand on the phone and the other on the dogs." Constantly helping to train the dogs, she came in early, and left late and trained every chance she got. She drove 70 miles one way each day to come to a job she loves. Eventually she became a full-time puppy raiser.

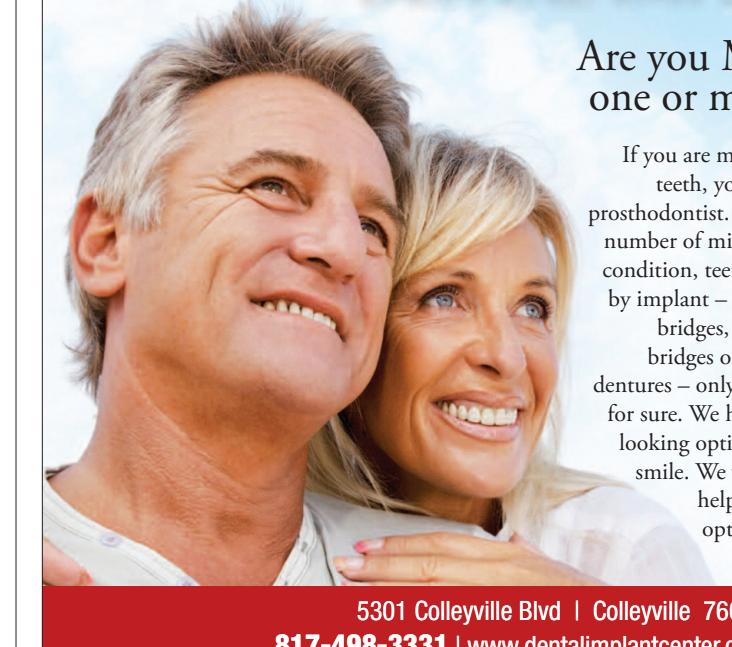
AJ said her coworkers help restore a little bit of her dignity each day. When asked where she sees herself in 5-10 years, she said right here—training dogs. "I want to help Lori and our team shorten our veterans list and get those dogs to them so they can start living again. How many people can say they wake up each day doing what they love to do? And I'm an ex-offender," she said. "I'm honored to live in this great country!"

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