



SPECIAL NEEDS RESOURCE PROJECT

e-newsletter

Things to Think About!



By Brandan Atkin

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Recommended Reading:

Once a Warrior: Wired For Life
by Bridget C. Cantrell PhD

Down Range: To Iraq and Back
by Bridget C. Cantrell PhD

*Courage After Fire: Coping Strategies
for Troops Returning from Iraq and
Afghanistan and Their Families*
by Keith Armstrong

If there is anything that is not discussed
in our newsletters and you would like to
see it discussed, or you would like to be
added to our newsletter mailing list,
please contact us at
snrproject@hotmail.com

**Executive Director's Note: Periodically we run across programs which deserve a second and even third look. This program is assisting returning servicemen and women treating Post Traumatic Stress Disorder utilizing non-invasive canine therapy. The results have been outstanding! It is this Executive Director's opinion this program needs more funding and expanding.*

Alaska Assistance Dogs and PTSD Carole J. Shay, LPC



Alaska Assistance Dogs (AAD) is a 501c3 non-profit that promotes well-being and healthy living for Alaskans with special needs. Our premise is simple: match a child, teen or adult with special needs with a professionally trained service dog or enroll them in a therapeutic program of service dog training...then step back and watch the magic happen. The human-animal bond has been studied from coast to coast by University of California, Irvine to University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Interaction of Animals. They agree there is a need for good research in this field, but acknowledge that there is something about that animal-human bond that changes lives. AAD has worked with men, women, teens and children with PTSD, depression, and trauma-based behavioral issues. The results include: renewed self-confidence and self-esteem; the ability to return to life and function in the community, the ability to trust, and for young and old alike to experience healthy loving, touching and hugging in a safe environment.

The therapeutic "magic" is provided by those wonderful service dogs with the soft temperament, and their unique ability to sense and respond to the needs of "their human." It has been the basis for service dog training since the concept was created in 1975 by Dr. Bonnie Bergin of Assistance Dog Institute in California. AAD has added to the service dog model by incorporating therapeutic programming into the two-year

period it takes to train a service dog. Programs include kids with Autism and FASD, school-aged youngsters with behavioral issues and kids to adults with PTSD from war, domestic violence, sexual abuse or childhood trauma. AAD's programs are created and monitored by a therapist and operated by a staff of service dog trainers taught by Dr. Bergin. The dogs used are very special golden retrievers and other similarly soft and intuitive breeds. The most consistent "side effects" of working with a service dog are reduced medication, fewer trips to the doctor or therapist, an outlook of hope, socializing, a return to the community, and often, the ability to return to work.

Service Dogs and PTSD

The following is what a serviceman asked for in an interview: "Can you help me with my panic attacks, night terrors, hypervigilance, anxiety and anger, fear of



crowds and people being too close?" Amazingly, the answer was, "Yes!" As you can read from the thoughts of several individuals with PTSD below, there is something about a dog sensing and reacting to the stresses of PTSD that brings relief.

Common to individuals with PTSD is the inability to function well outside the home. A service dog has the capacity to detect and signal for rising panic attacks, low blood pressure, low blood sugar, pending fainting spells or seizures, a stranger coming up from behind, a nightmare or night terror. The dog can move its owner out of a stressful public situation by nudging or tugging, can signal that someone is coming up from behind or step between the owner and someone coming too close. During nightmares or night terrors the dog can wake its master and provide close body contact. The dog can do "perimeter checks" or "stand watch" while its master sleeps. Dogs can detect and signal for low blood pressure and blood sugar, even rising blood temperature.

Dogs change lives paw-sitively.

Thoughts on the Benefits of Having a PTSD Service Dog

Eyes open, I see the sunshine and I know I have slept. I eagerly take my shower, dress and walk out the door to go shopping. There is a skip in my step as I say hello with a smile to the person walking by me. Wow!!! How is this possible? Six months ago I could barely get out of bed, let alone say hello to a stranger. I have Sir Duke to thank for that. He is my service dog.

Almost instantly I noticed a change in my sleep habits, eating habits, and social habits. I didn't need all the mood altering medications the doctors tried to give me. Sir Duke provides non-judgmental support. He wakes me quietly if I am having night terrors. He assures me it is OK to sleep. He helps me in the store by letting me know someone is coming from behind or from the side. He detects the change in my heart rate and blood pressure and lets me know there may be a panic attack on the way. If I do have a panic attack he is there to help me through. No more running, no more hiding. No more locking the doors and pulling the curtains shut and no more crying when the phone rings. These are all things I experienced on a daily basis with my Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. All though I am not "completely cured", I am well on my way to living life again. Sir Duke has made more difference in my life than 13 years of extensive, expensive therapy, counseling and medications. Dogs do change lives!!!!!!

A.M. 4-11-11

I was asked to write a letter describing how Jill, my assistance dog, has affected my life. The best I can do is say "she gave me a life." Before Jill saved me, I was a "shut in" who went to town once a month for a doctor's appointment and supplies. When I was forced to go I couldn't sleep for days before. While in town the anxiety,



Our Dynamic Duo

crowds and lack of sleep made the anxiety so bad I took tranquilizers non-stop just to hold it together long enough to take care of business. Once home (and having survived the trip) thing became worse. I was so mentally and physically depleted that the flashbacks, depression and everything else would begin. For most people a trip to town for a routine doctor's appointment and shopping is an irritation at worst, but for some of us it's a major event that begins days before and requires days or weeks (this is true, but sounds overly dramatic) after to recover.

When AAD gave me Jill everything began to change. She is very social animal, so I started finding myself sitting at a coffee house or bookstore so *she* could socialize. She dragged me to town to see her friends so many times I became used to it. I could give a lot of other examples, but the bottom lines is I am not just surviving any more I am living a life. I see the doctor every 3 months instead of every month, and I am taking 50-60% less medication.

Dogs like Jill give screwed up people like me a chance at a real life and saves the government a lot of money (something they need to take note of).

T.P. 4-9-11

Being a young adult, I used to look at my friends and was envious that they didn't have to deal with the pain, depression, anxiety, or panic attacks that I had to endure. I was terrified of normal everyday things like beeps and machines. I was scared of everything due to not knowing what might randomly set me into a spiral of panic and anxiety. I had no motivation to live my life, even on many pharmaceutical drugs. It's amazing to look at my life now since Remi, my service dog, joined my side. She has accomplished 10 fold what years of counseling and pills have in a sliver of the time. I now have a reason to get up in the morning. I am not afraid to tackle what the day might throw at me. Even though I still have anxiety and panic attacks I am able to overcome those with Remi. When I go into a panic attack she is the one who lies by my side comforting me in any way causing me to come out of the attacks faster



and more okay. Words truly cannot explain what my service dog has done for me.

A.M. 4-12-11

I'm a survivor of incest, molestation and rape. Because of that I've been diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder Sever Recurring, Anxiety Disorder and PTSD. I disassociate, I can't be in large crowd especially if it's noisy, I have nightmares, I don't feel safe in public, I'm always on guard to see where I'm going to get hurt, I have major issues standing in line because people overly encroach on my space, I have flashbacks that take me to another place. It's been so bad that I've been battling suicide. This is just a small snapshot of what I deal with daily.

My therapist prescribed a service dog for me. I was lucky and found a local company, Alaska Assistance Dogs.

When I first meet with them to train I had to numb myself because of not knowing what to expect and it being a new situation. That first



day when my anxiety started to rise when the dog stood against me and let me pet him I could feel my level go down. They got a new puppy and I've been training with her. There is just something in her that I connect to. She is someone I don't have to fear, when I love on her things seem ok. But the thing that is most important is that when the days have gotten extremely dark the one thing that keeps me going is knowing that on Friday I will get to see her again.



How I believe my life will be different with a service dog is, she will be able to assist me in grounding myself when I disassociate and have panic attacks. I'm scared of what happens

when I disassociate and knowing that I have a dog with me gives me peace of mind. When I have nightmares she will be able to turn on the light and wake me up before I get deep into it. She will be able to clear my home and hallways for me so I don't have to fear. In public she will be able to be a barrier between me and other people so that I can stay in my level of comfort. On the days that I'm beyond depressed and don't want to get out of bed or go outside she will be the motivation to get me up and going. These are just a few ways that I know she will be able to assist me. I know that when I'm able to be with her full time my life will change. And I guess that's hope where I haven't had any.

S.C. 4-12-11

To Whom this may concern,

I've suffered with PTSD for many years- to say life has been a struggle would be an understatement

indeed... I'm a wife of 21 years and a mother of four- PTSD is debilitating... for the entire family.

In the past few weeks, I have had the opportunity to learn about service dogs and interact with some as well. This experience has brought about many positive changes in my life that I really can't explain.... Feelings of hope, safety and accomplishment appear in the horizon every time I am around the dogs. I know that having a service dog of my own would seriously impact my quality of life!

Hopefully one day... I'll be able to offer this sort of hope to others in need and have a really great story to tell!!

Regards,
M. J. M. 4-12-11



**Tigger and Parent Volunteer, snuggle command.
Tigger passed away recently after many good years with AAD. Tigger will be sorely missed.**