

Paws for thought

Hunting's selected charity, Patriot PAWS, provides life-saving support to disabled military personnel

It is a long standing Hunting tradition to annually support an individual Texan organisation that is going to extraordinary lengths to improve the lives of others. This year, it was announced that Patriot Paws had been selected during a ceremonial donation at the Hunting Art Prize awards.

A Dallas-based dog trainer with over 20 years of professional experience, Lori Stevens has dedicated her career to restoring the independence and improving the lives of those affected by mobility issues. Stevens' charity, Patriot Paws, was founded in 2006 after a group of disabled military veterans, recently

returned from active service, asked for her assistance with training their dogs.

The mission of Patriot Paws is to provide - and train - service dogs for American veterans and others suffering both from physical and emotional disabilities in order to help re-establish an independent way of life. Funded entirely by private donations, the charity places service dogs with veterans free of charge and is focused on developing partnerships within local community organisations to secure ongoing support for its vital work. The average cost to train one full service dog for mobility disabilities is \$27,000.

Since its establishment, Patriot Paws has grown exponentially. The Rockwall facility today has a staff of 10 with 140 volunteers from the locality and 42 puppy raisers, as well as satellite groups based in South Carolina, Texas A&M University and Tyler.

PAWS FOR THOUGHT

Patriot Paws puppies usually begin training at 6-12 weeks of age and trained until they are up to two years old. Stevens selects Labrador retrievers as the breed of choice due to their size and stamina, which offer balance support for those with mobility assistance, while the dogs' mouth structure enables them to pick items from the floor.



The instinct to 'retrieve' is also beneficial as their behaviour is shaped to fetch items and bringing them back on cue.

The services performed by each dog depend on the specific needs of the owner and the team work tirelessly to match veterans with suitable dogs. While mundane, the list of the daily tasks that the dogs assist with is exhaustive, and has a huge impact on the lives of their owners. The basic tasks the dogs are trained to perform include: getting help in emergencies; recognising and averting Post Traumatic Stress Disorder episodes; picking up and retrieving items; opening and closing doors; pulling wheelchairs; providing bracing to stand, walk, and sit down; helping with chores, such as laundry; and taking off shoes and socks.

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

A veteran of both the US Navy and Army, in December 2009 Richard Heath of Rowlett, Texas received a black Labradoodle named Wendy from Patriot Paws. Some years later Richard, who was home alone with Wendy, suffered a stroke. Describing the experience, Richard recalls how after falling to the floor and unable to move, Wendy dragged him to his chair in the next room so he could lift himself up and brought over a phone, offering it to his right hand as usual. When the dog realised that Richard was unable to use his right hand, she put it in his left hand instead – something she had not been trained to do.

Thankfully, Richard has largely recovered from the effects of the stroke and credits Wendy with saving his life. It is indeed a clear example of how a service dog's connection to its owner goes way beyond its training – they think and act as one. In Richard's case, Wendy was able to think and act for the both of them.

DOGGED DETERMINATION

Citing the most enjoyable part of her job, Stevens describes "watching the relationship between the veteran and service dog blossom into a tightly knit, devoted unit". This typically occurs during the initial ten day placement, or 'graduation', period and is a culmination of the team's hard work over the 18 month training period.

It is the charity's policy to allow the dog to choose its master rather than the more typical alternative. Bonding is a vital part of the 'matching' process and for this reason is made an absolute priority. The graduation stage usually starts with four days when the veteran spends time with a number of dogs, who have all been trained in the same way, and experiments five

'cues' with each. Bonds develop naturally at an early stage and the trainers watch for consistencies such as eye contact, approachability and focus between the two. Stevens even documents a time when a PTSD attack occurred during a training session and how the dog broke away from its handler to go to the veteran in distress.

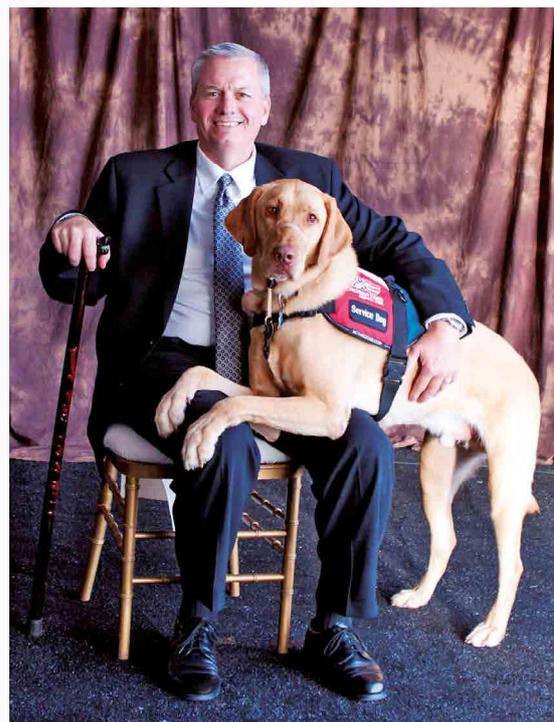
With the drawdown of troops from Afghanistan nearing completion, the already high demand for Stevens' services looks set to grow significantly. Average waiting time from application for a dog to approval is roughly two years, and there is up to 100 veterans on the waiting list. Plans are currently underway for training young rescue dogs found in local shelters to join the Patriot Paws pack.

"Words cannot express how honoured we are to have the backing of a company that shares in our conviction and determination for helping others," said Lori Stevens, Founder and Executive Director of Patriot PAWS. "We're grateful for the support and generosity of Hunting and for giving us the ability to foster new opportunities and hope for those in need." ■

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Clay Rankin and his dog Harley