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# A 'Pawsitive' pairing: Service dogs matched with veterans in need

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Contributing Writers

The WNY Heroes program held a unique graduation on Sept. 8. But reading, writing and arithmetic are not part of the skill set for the trainees. In fact, it's doubtful that these grads could even read their certificates: That's because they are graduates of the four-legged variety – service dogs trained in the program, "Pawsitive for Heroes."

Four canines were trained by inmates of the Niagara County Correctional Facility in Lockport, and the ceremony was held there, as well. Then the canines were turned over to the four military veterans who will be their companions.

It's all part of the positive aspect of the "Pawsitive for Heroes" program in which inmates train therapy dogs to be companions for veterans who have medical needs such as PTSD or other service-related disabilities. The program began in 2013 and this is the third graduating class. In mid-October, the WNY Heroes will bring in four more dogs for training.

The service dogs are with their handlers 24/7, sleeping right in the housing unit with the inmates who train them. Each canine is certified as having received 160 hours of service dog training. The dogs are typically named after fallen soldiers or honored community members.

One of the dogs whined plaintively as Sheriff Michael Filicetti took to the podium at the graduation ceremony. The admonition from the sheriff, "You're going to have to quiet down," brought a chuckle from the audience.

"This program in the Niagara County Correctional Facility would not be possible without the help of a lot of people. You don't just bring dogs into a jail and think you're going to be successful doing it on your own," Filicetti said. "Training them to be turned over as service dogs to veterans doesn't work that way. It takes a lot of people."

He thanked everyone who works cooperatively to make the program a success: the crew from WNY Heroes for bringing the dogs in and helping to train them; the rescue organizations that provide the animals; the jail administration; the rank and file who help the program along by working in proximity to the pod where the dogs are housed; and the handlers, without whom, he said, the program would not be a success.

Filicetti noted a good percentage of the work force in the Niagara



Inmates seen in the photo have trained the dogs for the "Pawsitive for Heroes" program. The service animals are given to local vets in need.

County Sheriff's Office consists of veterans.

"We are very cognizant of the sacrifices that our veterans make and have made. We've seen a lot of tragedy through war, through combat," he said. "Veterans need help and, if we can play a small role in that help, I think we should step up and make sure we do that by offering handlers, offering training, and providing a setting where we can train dogs. That is our small way of offering the help to our veterans, by providing a service dog" in the end of the training process.

Filicetti called the program "a win-win-win." He said, "It's a win for the dogs that are rescued; it's a win for our handlers who learn the training; and it's a win for our veterans at the end of the day that get the service dog."

Chris Kreiger of WNY Heroes is founder of "Pawsitive for Heroes."

"We saw that there was a serious need," he explained. "Myself having a service dog is how and why I created the program."

Kreiger said his service dog saved his life – and a service dog can do the same for other veterans in the program. He said they get the dogs from rescues and the SPCA, and after they've had them for a little while, they get to know the dog's personality.

"Then we decide which veteran is going to be paired with what

dog," Kreiger said.

Similarly, the dogs get to know the veterans and traits such as what makes them happy and their energy level.

Kreiger said the entire training program typically lasts from 16 to 18 months. For the first 10 months of that time, the dogs to be trained are placed in one of three correctional facilities. The graduation comes next, then the service dog continues to train with their veteran for another six to eight months.

The dogs in this graduating class, including an African Boerboel, a St. Bernard and a poodle, got to exchange their training vests for graduation vests as they were presented to the veterans. A journal about their behavior, feeding habits, etc., is turned over to their new owners.

•Ella, a poodle, is going to Irv Sellers, an Army veteran.

•Abby, the African Boerboel, is going to Katherine Mehnert, a veteran of the U.S. Army National Guard.

•Ben will be matched with Tony Cippola, an Army veteran who couldn't attend the ceremony.

•Terry, a St. Bernard, will be going to Michael Weston, an Army veteran.

Sellers was very grateful to be receiving Ella: "It's overwhelming. I, too, can't thank everybody enough for what they did to help the three of us with the dogs. I'm a little appre-

hensive to a certain degree because this is a new beginning for me, and I welcome it with open arms."

He promised to give Ella a good home and said the dog is going to be a big help to him: "I can't say enough about WNY Heroes for giving me this opportunity to have a service dog that's going to help me out a great deal."

Katherine Mehnert of Grand Island, who served about 10 years in the U.S. Army National Guard, was matched with Abby, the African Boerboel. She applied to be part of the "Pawsitive for Heroes" program and received a quick response.

"I think this is going to be an amazing opportunity to almost give me a reset on life, and I'm so excited to know that she'll be by my side, and I just couldn't be happier. It's a blessing," Mehnert said.

She noted being paired up with her service dog was a mutual thing: "I reached out to Chris when I knew (Abby) did not have a vet assigned and said, 'I absolutely love and adore her,' and he said, 'That's terrific, because it was the one I was going to pick for you anyway.'"

Mehnert said the initial training for the service dog by handlers in the jail is disciplinary.

"Now, our training for both her and I, going forward over the next year or so, is strictly based on the needs that I have and how she is to act in the public."

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