

Vet's Best Friend



HILLSBORO-BASED NONPROFIT IS HELPING VETERANS RECLAIM THEIR LIVES, ONE PUP AT A TIME

Above: Christina Mulick, a dog trainer with Paws Assisting Veterans, sits with a yellow lab named "Marshal" in her apartment in Bethany, Ore. (Hillsboro Tribune photo by Christopher Oertell)

Six months ago, T.J. Theodoroff was worried he might not survive.

After a career in the military, Theodoroff — a combat veteran of both the U.S. Army and the Air Force — struggled for years to adapt to civilian life.

He found himself unable to enter stores, or interact in crowds. Loud noises would trigger anxiety attacks.

At night, Theodoroff would pace around his Lebanon home, on patrol for danger. He thought seriously about quitting his job as a network analyst for the city of Salem.

"The military teaches you to always be vigilant," he said. "In combat, you are hyper-vigilant. It's how you survive. When you are

in that state for so long, it becomes second nature. You get over stimulated."

But Theodoroff says his life turned around after he met Jag, a 3-year-old black Labrador retriever who goes with Theodoroff everywhere he goes.

Jag is more than a pet. The dog is specially trained to help him with his day-to-day routine, thanks to a Hillsboro nonprofit group that works with veterans across the state, free of charge.

Formed in 2010, Paws Assisting Veterans, or PAVE, provides service dogs to veterans with mental and physical disabilities.

The dogs fill a vital need, said Executive Director Christina Mulick. Nationally, an



Veteran T.J. Theodoroff, on his service dog, Jag

He is absolutely amazing. Without him, I would be a shut in. That's where I was headed.

veterans each year. Oregon is home to more than 323,000 veterans. Mulick estimated about 18 percent of them have some sort of disability.

"Some say they haven't gone into a store for five years," Mulick said. "They eat fast food and sit in their car. It can be really isolating. They are afraid to go to sleep."

The nonprofit is one of only three service dog organizations in Oregon accredited by Assistance Dogs International, which sets standards for assistance dogs across the globe.

In January, the organization received a \$5,000 grant from the Oregon International Air Show.

Donations and grants are important to the organization, Mulick said. PAVE makes sure veterans never have to pay for the animals they receive. The group survives entirely off of fundraisers and donations.

Theodoroff served in the U.S. military for more than 20 years and saw combat in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan, among other places. It was an experience that changed him, he said.

"There have been points that were debilitating," he said.

Coming home, loud noises and crowded places soon became too much for him, he said. Theodoroff was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. That, coupled with other health issues, made it difficult for Theodoroff to re-integrate into society, he said.

To cope, Theodoroff would go places only with his wife or 11-year-old daughter, who could steer him away from situations that would trigger an anxiety attack.

"Being in places like [The] Home Depot, where there is so much activity and loud noises and people bumping into you. It's too much," he said. "My daughter would be on top of it. They would see people up ahead and say, 'Let's go this way instead,' or go do something else."

But that added more stress, he said.

"The impact on your family is horrible. When your kids are always on alert that puts distance between you. They can't enjoy themselves, because they are always concerned

about you. It causes issues, on top of the anxiety. You want to shut down."

Theodoroff knew he had to do something. After learning about veteran service dogs, he contacted PAVE last year.

"It was time for me to be independent," he said.

After working with PAVE, Theodoroff and Jag are inseparable.

Jag opens doors, drags laundry baskets and picks up items off the floor. At work, Jag goes to meetings with Theodoroff and has a small bed at his cubicle. He wears a special vest, which contains Theodoroff's medication and documentation.

"He is absolutely amazing," he said.

"Without him, I would be a shut in. That's where I was headed. Because of him, I'm able to go into stores. Before, I knew if I went in I would have to leave because of anxiety attack or I would get overwhelmed. Now I know if I start having a hard time, he'll get my attention, he'll remove me from the situation."

The group's founder, Michelle Nelson, formed the organization nearly a decade ago after her son returned from serving in the Navy.

"There was one man we worked with who had nightmares that seemed so real he tied up his family. They couldn't wake him up," Nelson said. "He eventually had to leave, he was afraid he would hurt them. Now, the dog is able to sense when he is having a nightmare and wake him up before they get in too deep."

Theodoroff said the service animal helps him cope.

"Nothing will take away what I've been through, or make things magically better," he said. "But having a service dog is life-changing."

Theodoroff volunteers with the organization in any way he can, he said. Last year, he attended the group's annual fundraiser, to speak about the work Jag has done for him.

"You can't put a price on what I'll do for Jag," Theodoroff said. "I would give up many, many things in my life for him. My life has been totally changed. It's amazing." 🐾

average of 22 veterans commit suicide every day.

For many veterans, the wounds they bring home from the battlefield are invisible. Many struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder or other disabilities.

Many have anxiety attacks or nightmares. Their bodies are convinced they are in life-threatening situations, Mulick said.

"Their heart is racing and they are in dire fear for their lives, but they're having that experience at the checkout of a Safeway," Mulick said. "I have a new appreciation for what these veterans have been through."

Based in a business park off Cornelius Pass Road, PAVE serves about five new