



Stories from the Heart

“I am constantly grounded in the “now” of reality because I never forget for a moment that Hank is by my side. He always has my back. Hank saved me, Hank saves me everyday.”

- Sgt. Joshua Grantham (Ret) US Marine Corp, Special Operations, PTSD

The circle of Love

Rescuing dogs, rescuing people

by Linda Tynan

Listening to the low chatter in the Wilson Auditorium at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, you could feel the excitement in the room. It was August 2, 2015, graduation day for the participants of the Service Dogs Alabama program. Everyone was anxious to see the new graduates. The recipients proudly walked down the aisles of the auditorium with their new Service Dogs. They made their way up onto the stage where each one took a seat. It was amazing to see all 26 dogs on stage laying quietly by their owners. Everyone was in awe.



A video played, which gave an overview of the program. That was all it took to realize the magnitude of the work SDA is doing. Very touching video testimonials left quite the impression as the Kleenex® came out. And that was just the beginning.

Former inmate Beth Dodd took the podium and talked about how her life had hit rock bottom as a teenager, but was now forever changed. Beth was convicted of manslaughter, the result of an automobile accident when she was high on heroin speeding through a school zone. She struck and killed an eight-year old girl and seriously injured her mother. At 19 years old, Beth was making all the wrong choices and it cost her and her victims dearly.

As she was serving out her 17-year sentence in prison, she had no real meaning in her life. When she became involved with the SDA training program, things began to change. She felt like she had a purpose. By training these dogs, she was giving back. She was helping the people who would eventually receive these dogs. This feeling of being a part of something so worthwhile changed everything for Beth. After her release from prison two years ago, she continues to work with the SDA program and helps with training the dogs for future graduates.

Sgt. Joshua Grantham (Ret) US Marine Corp, Special Operations took the podium next and explained the effects that PTSD had on him after he returned from Iraq. Joshua did not return to life as he knew it. He was having problems adjusting to family responsibilities, holding a job, and getting back into an everyday routine. He was haunted by an incident he experienced in the Iraqi War which involved an infant that was seriously injured when a bomb went off. He would have nightmares reliving the raid, and whenever he heard a young child crying he felt anxious, panicked and paralyzed. Even the cry of his own baby would trigger those PTSD episodes. Joshua applied for assistance through the SDA program and he was given Hank, a black Labrador retriever.

“Training Service Dogs gave me a new perspective on life. I never knew that giving back could feel so good. I feel like I have a purpose greater than myself for the first time in my life.”

- Beth Dodd, Released Inmate



Ashley Taylor, Head Trainer at SDA, Beth Dodd and Frances McGowin at the 2014 graduation ceremony.



Hank and Sgt. Joshua Grantham (Ret) US Marine Corp.

Hank has brought stability to Joshua's life. He recognizes when Joshua is getting anxious and calms him down. Hank alerts Joshua when someone approaches from behind, and he is trained to wake him up from night terrors. Hank has made it possible for Joshua to deal with his PTSD, and to move forward with his life.

Ginger Henry followed Joshua with her testimonial. Ginger shared her story about how her young son Matthew was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. She talked about how he became more and more troubled, and all the difficulties he was having coping with the real world. He was unable to make friends at school, hiding under his desk, not wanting to interact with other children. Teachers were constantly calling, and there seemed to be no answer for helping Matthew. Ginger tearfully described how helpless she felt watching her son disappear from her and not knowing how to help him. At the time when she thought she had no where else to turn, she learned about SDA. She frantically called their director, Frances McGowin, determined to talk to her immediately. Could SDA help Matthew? Would they qualify? How long was the wait? After an emotional conversation with Frances, Ginger felt like there was hope for the first time in many years. Eight months later, Matthew was introduced to a yellow Labrador retriever named Hazel, and they began working together. Everything changed. Matthew is now able to attend class and feel comfortable at

continued on p. 20



Hazel and Matthew sharing a moment.

“To see the confidence on the face of a marine veteran who suffers from PTSD as he hugs his Service Dog and tells me ‘thank you for helping save my life,’ makes everything I do for this program worthwhile.”

- Cade Armstrong, DVM, Volunteer Veterinarian

ALVMA's Cade Armstrong honored with the SDA Veterinarian Volunteer Award



Dr. Cade Armstrong examines Daisy, a Service Dog in training.

Cade Armstrong, DVM of Montgomery Veterinary Associates became involved with Service Dogs Alabama six years ago. Cade was approached by their director, Frances McGowin. She asked him if he would be interested in helping them with veterinary care for their Service Dogs in training. For Cade it was an easy decision.

At this year's Graduation ceremony, Cade was honored by SDA for his unselfish dedication and generous donation of his time and services.

“Dr. Armstrong is one of the most generous people that I know. Aside from regular maintenance care for

all of our Service Dogs in training, we have had a few dogs who have needed surgeries and intensive care to continue in the program. Dr. Armstrong always takes care of our dogs no matter what the problem. He knows every Service Dog that we have awarded to a child or veteran. Service Dogs Alabama could not rescue so many dogs and change so many lives without Dr. Armstrong's support,” says SDA Executive Director Frances McGowin.

“I was inspired to help this service group because they help so many dogs and people including children and veterans with disabilities who are awarded the dogs.”

Cade believes that as a group, veterinarians are very giving individuals. “In this situation, we have been able to help play a small role in creating a human animal bond that benefits everyone involved. There is no way to express how this makes me feel, but it always puts a smile on my face,” says Cade.

If asked by another veterinarian why they should get involved with Service Dogs Alabama, Cade would encourage them to go speak to one of the recipients of a Service Dog and listen to that individual's personal story on how their Service Dog has changed their life. Cade emphasizes, “To see the confidence on the face of a marine veteran who suffers from PTSD as he hugs his Service Dog and tells me ‘thank you for helping save my life,’ makes everything I do for this program worthwhile. If that won't convince them to give their time and skill set to help these dogs nothing will.”

“Our world changed when Hazel saw Matthew for who he is - precious and wonderful, and through Hazel's eyes, Matthew found himself.”

- Ginger Henry, Mother of Matthew, Asperger's Syndrome



Jessica and School Service Dog, Captain. Jessica is Captain's guardian, he lives with her, travels with her and she takes him to school every day.

“The School Service Dog program, called Follow the Lead, changes the way teachers and counselors manage their students. It defies popular theory, but really pays off in the end.”

- Jessica Shields, Counselor and Educator at Holtville Elementary

charge. SDA is a multi-functional organization, which is always on the cutting-edge of training dogs to be a catalyst for change.

Four missions of SDA:

1) **To rescue dogs.** Puppies and dogs that have been abandoned are rescued from shelters and rescue organizations, socialized, raised by volunteers and given a second chance. A small number of dogs are donated from reputable breeders. SDA takes these dogs and trains them to be Service Dogs through a program designed to help prison inmates.

2) **To rehabilitate inmates.** When puppies reach the age of 10 months, they are sent to prison to be trained. Here they learn the lifestyle of how to be a Service Dog, and prisoners discover the value of doing something meaningful in their life. Prisoners that participate in the SDA training program have a recidivism rate of zero percent. They never reoffend.

3) **To provide trained service dogs to children and veterans with disabilities.** In the United States, 22 veterans commit suicide every day. The program of SDA provides a lifeline to our disabled veterans. SDA places dogs with children and veterans to help them live a more normal life. SDA trains dogs for diabetic alert, seizure detection, Asperger's Syndrome, wheelchair assistance and PTSD. These dogs prevent their owners from serious attacks and build their confidence to be able to live as productive citizens.

4) **To provide full time working school dogs to assist educators.** School Dogs take away the stress of socialization and connecting with other students. Teachers have praised the use of dogs in the classroom to break through to children dealing with issues.

K9s 4 Kids, K9s 4 Heroes and K9s 4 Schools provides training and placement of Service and School Dogs through generous

school. He interacts with classmates, friends and family and is confident in social and public situations. Matthew is now an honor roll student, he plays in the band and has many friends, but Hazel is Matthew's best friend.

Last but certainly not least, Jessica Shields, a counselor and educator with Elmore County Schools talked about how Captain, a chocolate Labrador/golden retriever mix, helped her reach students when nothing else would work. Children who were troubled or were having issues at school and had shut down, would now open up to her. The unconditional acceptance of Captain opened the door for communication through his ability to make the children feel at ease. Captain allows students to get past their behavior problems and get to the core issues. Some children are troubled by bullying and others by peer isolation. Something as simple as walking Captain can break the barrier with other schoolmates and give a child confidence. Captain lives with Jessica, and is one of 13 School Dogs placed in the Elmore County School System this year.



Then and now

The K9s 4 Kids and K9s 4 Heroes programs were formerly under the Easter Seals Alabama nonprofit umbrella. Due to the rapid growth of the SDA organization, they incorporated as an independent nonprofit organization with their own board of directors in March of 2015. Service Dogs trained by SDA are provided to children and veterans with disabilities and qualifying nonprofit facilities and schools **free of**

SDA Mission fulfillment:

- To save dogs from rescues and shelters and promote shelter adoption.
 - Dogs saved: Approaching 100
- To rehabilitate prison inmates through the therapeutic benefits of training Service Dogs.
 - Inmates rehabilitated: 78
- To change the lives of disabled children and Veterans in Alabama by awarding them a Service Dog specifically trained to meet their needs. (Also place Emotional Support Dogs (ESD) and trained companion pets.)
 - Successful placements: Approximately 96%
- To assist teachers and schools in building confidence and easing anxieties of struggling students.
 - Thirteen School Dogs assigned to start schools Fall 2015

SDA has a 1-2 year wait for Service Dogs, and have increased the number of dogs they have in the training process from 12 to 26.

www.servicedogsalabama.com

donations, volunteers, puppy-raisers, and veterinarians who offer their services. SDA is based in Montgomery, and is in the process of purchasing 43 acres of land just off of I-65 in Hope Hull where they plan to build a Service Dog Training Center, a Retreat Center and Public Boarding and Training facility.

How you can help

SDA adopt dogs from rescues and shelters around the state. Many of the rescued dogs need medical services before they can train to become service dogs. Veterinarian volunteers are needed primarily in the Decatur, Huntsville, Tuscaloosa and Mobile areas to donate vaccinations, spay/neuter surgeries, and provide occasional care to the puppies and dogs that are rescued and/or fostered in these communities. These rescued puppies and dogs will go on to change someone's life, you can be a part of that process. Presently, the participating clinics donate all services, and allow SDA to purchase medications and treatments at cost. If you would be interested in helping SDA with their mission of rescuing, training and placing Service Dogs across the state of Alabama, or simply making a monetary donation, please contact Frances McGowin at 334-462-2463. It is your opportunity to change someone's life forever.