

SAVING EACH OTHER

A dog, a man and a miracle

BY CHRISTINE MCLAUGHLIN

Time was ticking away for Rocky, a one-year old, German Shepherd/Husky mix. He was scheduled to be euthanized at the animal shelter in just one week. At the same time, Jeremiah Gaches, an unemployed U.S. Army veteran with traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) needed significant help getting through his day—the kind that could best be delivered by an intelligent, tail-wagging, four-legged assistant. Both Rocky and Gaches had some good luck last Christmas when they met to be paired as a new team through Project HIRED, a member of the AbilityOne® Network of nonprofit agencies.

Gaches' physical and emotional experience is not uncommon for returning veterans who have sacrificed and fought bravely for our nation. When these veterans are looking for employment, their challenges can be compounded by misperceptions of potential employers and others in civilian life. Many veterans need extra encouragement and support to get through their day and eventually back to work.

"We were running into a lot of doctors and therapists who were saying that the veterans just weren't ready to get back to work because of [the severity of their] illness and injuries," said Gwen Ford, executive director of the nonprofit agency Project HIRED in San Jose, Calif. "So we decided that service dogs can help with getting them back into civilian life and the workforce. And we've been having a lot of success with it."

In September 2010 Project HIRED established a goal for its new service dog program: increase independence, offer social support and improve employability of veterans with injuries. To be successful, Project HIRED partners with the Silicon Valley Humane Society, which donates the dogs to the program, and with K9 Coach Plus, which offers dog training.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Although most service dog programs provide completely trained dogs to people with disabilities, Project HIRED's program is unique because the veterans don't have to wait the typical five to 13 years for a fully trained dog. Instead, the wait is



Rocky and Gaches



Rocky gets Gaches up and out

usually about only one to two months because the veterans are actively involved in finding, raising and training their dogs to their own specific needs. From the first day of training, the veteran and the service dog must live together. This living arrangement helps the veteran to be engaged in his or her own recovery, boosts personal responsibility and shortens the training

tasks are assigned daily. The combined training lasts for at least a year.

The training is intense and specific, and not just any veteran can receive a service dog. The dogs are provided free to the veterans, but because the dogs are expensive to train—about \$15,000 per dog—a veteran must demonstrate a medical need. (The program operates solely with donations from corporations and

And not just any dog will do. Although the dogs can be any breed or combination of breeds imaginable and are found in animal shelters, their personality and attributes must match the veteran's needs.

WHAT THE DOGS CAN DO

These enthusiastic dogs can be trained to do almost anything a veteran needs.

... one canine is being trained to alert his veteran of his seizures and others are trained to help with physical demands like putting on a prosthesis or retrieving items.

time while increasing the opportunity for success.

Training sessions range from two to four hours twice a week with a trainer, and homework sessions on specific

individuals.) Therefore, applicants must be assessed by Project HIRED and have medical verification of both their disability and the exact areas where a service dog can help.

For example, one canine is being trained to alert his veteran of his seizures and others are trained to help with physical demands like putting on a prosthesis or retrieving items.

To provide Gaches with needed personal space and security, he has trained Rocky to block groups of people when they get within two feet of him. He has also taught Rocky to check the house to ensure that their home is safe.

“When I would hear a noise in my room, I’d get up constantly and check everything out. So I trained Rocky to search the house. I would hide treats all over the house, and he thought it was a game,” said Gaches, who lives in Lodi, Calif. “He picked it up quickly.” Now he searches the house any time Gaches needs him to.

Gaches has trained Rocky to wake him from a nightmare by turning on the lights rather than by touching him. The light is comforting to Gaches.

WHAT THE VETERANS CAN DO

Every day, life gets a little better for Gaches. Already Rocky has helped him learn to go outside again, walk through the streets and brave the crowds in flea markets and restaurants. The more Gaches goes out with Rocky, the more he is inspired to do. Gaches says that Rocky gives him the comfort and confidence he needs.

Gaches’s four-footed helper even assisted him in a recent television interview. “I have TBI [traumatic brain injury], so I don’t think quickly, and the more nervous I get, the worse it gets. So [during the interview] Rocky was sitting next to me. We’d been working on when he notices my anxiety levels are getting too high to jump on my lap. He automatically did it in the interview—jumped in front of the camera and wouldn’t get off my lap,” said Gaches. “From that point, I knew Rocky was going to make it as a service dog.”

In fact, Rocky was recently tested and earned recognition as a certified service dog. In addition, Gaches has been motivated to volunteer with Operation Freedom Paws, a nonprofit group that also helps train service dogs for veterans.

But the progress that Gaches has made isn’t just noticeable to him. “I’m just so proud of him. It’s amazing what

he’s doing now,” Ford says. “It’s a total difference.”

WHAT THE AbilityOne® PROGRAM CAN DO

When Gaches is ready to go back to work, Ford explains that he can work in a VA Medical Center call center, a service provided under the AbilityOne Program, and Project HIRED will support him by allowing Rocky to accompany him to work. Gaches will also have a flexible schedule to slowly get him acclimated to the work environment.

For Ford, seeing the impact these dogs have made on the veterans has made it one of the most rewarding programs she’s ever been involved with in her career. “Just to see someone come

out of a depression and light up and tell you about [his] dog. It’s just fascinating,” she says.

The bond that’s developed between Gaches and Rocky is as strong as that of family members, he says. “Rocky is by my side the whole time, 24/7, and we watch out for each other. I’ve never had anything quite like my service dog. It’s a lot stronger of a bond than with a normal pet,” explains Gaches, who’s had mixed breed pet dogs all his life.

Because of this special closeness, Rocky has been nothing short of a life-saver. “Before I had Rocky, I had pretty much cut myself off from the world. I stayed in my room and didn’t ever come out. Rocky is the only one who could actually get me up and out,” Gaches said. “He’s my best friend.” ■

