

K9s for Warriors: Together We Stand by Scott Smith

[Note from DG Editors: Last week's Awakin Call featured Janessa Gans Wilder. A former CIA officer turned peace builder. If you'd like to help transcribe a few minutes of this powerful interview (which will be turned into an upcoming DailyGood feature) you can join the crowd-sourced effort [here](#)]

Soldier, take me from this shelter's cage.
Give me back my life. In return, I'll cover your back.
I'll be your canine warrior, your sixth sense.
I'll stand guard into the night and chase the demons away,
the uninvited, cloaked in night sweats and darkness.

I will help you open your cage of solitude
then walk tall by your side into the light of day.
Together, our faith will rise as tall as your soldier's pride.
We are now family in this post-911 world.
Because together, we stand.

-Bridget Cassidy

James Rutland, with his service dog Dunkin

MEET JAMES AND DUNKIN

James Rutland is a 12-year Army veteran who served a tour of duty in Iraq in 2004, followed by two more tours in South Korea. He left the military in 2014, suffering from multiple medical conditions related to his service, including mild traumatic brain injury (TBI), sleep apnea, and hearing loss, to name a few.

Most importantly, he suffered from depression and often thought about suicide. Thinking he could do it alone, Rutland tried healing from the trauma on his own. That wasn't working. "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you always got," says Rutland.

What Life Without Dunkin? -- James Rutland of K9s For Warriors

In 2016, Rutland finally rounded the bend of recovery when he was paired with his service dog, Dunkin. "I started focusing on "we instead of "me", says Rutland.

He has a semi-colon tattoo on his right wrist, a known symbol of taking a pause when

thinking about suicide. Unlike a “period” which ends a sentence, the semicolon creates a pause, for the reader, then continues the story. Rutland wears it proudly. “It’s a great conversation starter,” Rutland says.

He goes on to explain that breathing, family, friends, and the program that gave him Dunkin are what keeps him going.

Shari Duval, Founder, with her son, Brett Simon, President of K9s For Warriors

THE PROGRAM: K9S FOR WARRIORS

K9s For Warriors is a BBB accredited charity organization located in Ponte Vedra, Florida, that has been pairing rescue dogs with traumatized soldiers since 2011. The dogs are trained to be service dogs, specifically performing tasks to quiet the symptoms of war trauma disabilities in soldiers.

“The skill sets our dogs learn help these warriors with anxiety, isolation, depression, and nightmares,” says Shari Duval, the founder of K9s For Warriors. “So, the warriors can function again in public.”

Specifically, the dogs are trained to deal with symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), or military sexual trauma (MST), as a result of military service on or after 9/11.

K9s For Warriors sees it as two battles: fighting the past of the dog and fighting the past of the warrior. We’re saving two lives here -Brett Simon

K9s For Warriors veterans walking with their service dogs

Duval started the program after watching her son Brett Simon suffer from PTSD after he returned from Iraq. Simon did two tours, developing PTSD during the first one. Watching her son suffer from the debilitating condition motivated Duval to research alternative treatments to the standard talk therapy and medication, neither of which worked for her son.

“On average, soldiers take 14 meds a day to treat PTSD, TBI, or MST,” says Duval. If treatment is not working, she says veterans are prescribed more and more drugs. “I even knew one soldier who was taking 44 meds per day.”

After two years of researching alternative PTSD treatments, Duval came upon a program that paired service dogs to alleviate their PTSD symptoms in veterans.

According to Simon, “Mom was the one that suggested I use a service dog to deal with my PTSD when nothing else worked.” Duval saw her son’s symptoms begin to improve. She then wanted to help other veterans do the same.

Thus, the K9s For Warrior program was born. With her son’s background in training dogs, including 13 years as a canine police officer, Duval convinced Simon to start the nonprofit together.

To date, the program has rescued more than 850 dogs and 440 military service members, with an astounding 99% program success rate.

Based on a recent Purdue study, the organization's mission seems to be making a difference in the lives of warriors.

From the Rand Corporation

WHAT IS PTSD?

PTSD is classified as a mental disorder that develops after a person experiences severe trauma as a result of a traumatic event such as warfare, sexual assault, auto accident, or other severely traumatic events. PTSD symptoms are re-experiencing, avoidance, arousal, and negative changes in beliefs and feelings. The disability manifests itself in depression, anxiety, night terrors, and social embarrassment resulting in isolation. Many individuals have initial symptoms while others can worsen, requiring treatment.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), it is common to have reactions such as upsetting memories of an event, increased anxiety, or trouble sleeping after experiencing a traumatic event. If these reactions do not go away or worsen, then the individual may have PTSD.

Along with TBI and MST, PTSD is recognized under the American Veterans Aid (AVA), the Department of Justice through the American Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Veteran's Association of America (VA). The Department of Defense (DoD) is also strongly committed to providing service members and families with access to quality mental health care and resources for all mental health conditions including PTSD.

I appreciated the willingness of K9s for Warriors to open their doors to research and science -- Dr. Maggie O'Haire

Dr. Maggie O'Haire and Jason Snodgrass of K9s For Warriors

PILOT STUDY AFFIRMS ANTICIPATED OUTCOME

K9s For Warriors recently partnered with Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine on a pilot study testing the effectiveness of service dogs as a complementary treatment for military members and veterans who suffer from PTSD. Dr. Maggie O'Haire, assistant professor of human-animal interaction, along with Kerri E. Rodriguez, research assistant, conducted the study and published the findings earlier this year.

The study had a total of 141 participants from the K9s For Warriors' program or individuals on the program's waiting list. Half of the program's participants had service dogs; the other half did not.

The study found that PTSD symptoms were significantly lower in veterans with service dogs, demonstrating that service dogs are associated with lower PTSD symptoms among war veterans. "The initial findings showed lower depression, lower PTSD symptoms, lower levels of anxiety, and lower absenteeism from work due to health issues," says Dr. O'Haire.

Each morning, she measured levels of cortisol - a stress hormone, in each participant; an increase of the hormone in the morning is indicative of a healthy level or curve. We tend to see a rise in cortisol immediately after waking up. "We call it the morning rise", says Dr. O'Haire.

Photo Credit: K9s For Warriors

Dr. Anantha Shekhar, Director of Indiana Clinical and Translational Sciences Institute, and professor at Indiana University School of Medicine was the lead researcher on the grant at the university. "Service dogs are a great resource for veterans to modulate their own reactions and to cope better with symptoms of PTSD," says Dr. Shekhar.

Dr. Timothy Hsiao, a Yale graduate, as well as the Program Director of the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS) at the National Institute of Health (NIH) awarded the NCATS award to Dr. O'Haire as a KL2 Scholar under the CTSA Career Development Award.

"This is an innovative approach to a serious medical issue," said Dr. Hsiao. "This study highlights the unique skills that the CTSA Program Hubs and their KL2 Scholars bring to address difficult conditions like PTSD."

Other key findings (in a related study) included a significant reduction in suicidal thoughts, required medication (not suggested by K9s For Warriors), night terrors, and an increase of three to four more hours of sleep per night. That is, in part, due to the fact that the service dogs are trained to wake up the warriors when experiencing night terrors. Purdue University is currently studying this behavior and although it hasn't been substantiated scientifically, it has been reported by K9s For Warriors anecdotally.

Dr. O'Haire has been granted additional funding from NIH to perform a large-scale study on the efficacy of service dogs as a complementary treatment of PTSD symptoms in military members and veterans. The study is scheduled to be completed in 2019.

Tiffany Baker and service dog, Buddy

THEY RESCUED EACH OTHER

Her senses were always up, in a constant state of fight or flight, ever since that day in May of 2012. Tiffany Baker, an Army National Guard soldier, was traveling in a Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle while stationed in Afghanistan when it hit a 250-pound IED. The bomb was so powerful, it rolled the heavily-enforced vehicle.

Baker sustained major physical injuries, requiring four hip surgeries the next year. She also suffered a traumatic brain injury because of the attack. "I was taking 17 medications between being overseas and then coming back," says Baker. She was frequently going to the VA, seeing a counselor, psychiatrists, and psychologists. "They were constantly giving me medications." She was feeling more and more isolated.

In February 2015, Baker medically retired, saying goodbye to her unit, the 1157 Transportation Company. That same year, she met Buddy through K9s For Warriors.

Buddy had been badly abused and neglected by his owner. Before being rescued, he was found tied to a tree without any food or water. "K9s For Warriors is great at pairing the dog with veterans," says Baker. She explains that Buddy always covers her back. He's "got her 6", and he creates a safe barrier between her and other people, allowing her to function in public.

Just as Buddy is my service dog, I am Buddy's service human -Tiffany Baker, K9s For Warrior graduate and advocate

Baker was so taken with Buddy and the 'K9s For Warriors' program that she got involved in supporting the PAWS (Puppies Assisting Wounded Service Members) Act of 2017 that got the VA on board with service dogs helping veterans. The bill directs the VA to carry out a five-year pilot program, providing grant funding to qualifying nonprofits that provide service dogs to military members or veterans who suffer from PTSD after they finalize other traditional treatments.

Baker actually spoke at a press conference in support of the act. "Going into the public was very difficult," says Baker. "I'm always watching over my back."

But Buddy has helped Baker to get back out into the public. Tiffany graduated this past May from Waukesha County Technical College with a degree in business management, and an emphasis in social media marketing. As Baker puts it, she is like every other broken person whose service dog keeps them going. She says, "I need to get out of bed to take care of him."

The two rescued each other.

Service dog gazing up at veteran

WAR TRAUMA: THE MONSTER IN THE ROOM

Seventeen years at war with a volunteer military has resulted in U.S. soldiers being deployed multiple times more than any other time in modern history. According to a recent Rand Corporation report, 2.77 million service members have been deployed on 5.4 million deployments since 9/11, with around 225,000 Army soldiers having been deployed at least three times or more.

The DoD reported that between 2000 and September 2017, about 173,000 active-duty service members were diagnosed with PTSD in the military health system, with about 139,000 of those being diagnosed following a deployment of 30 days or more.

According to the DoD, PTSD is treatable, and many service members will recover with appropriate treatment. However, many do not.

It is invisible and causes panic attacks, survivor guilt, anger, etc. -- Brett Simon

Dr. Andrea Roberts, Research Scientist with the T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard University says PTSD is common in civilian life. "Most PTSD goes untreated," says Roberts. "Individuals suffering from PTSD have higher tendencies for cardiovascular disease, high-blood pressure, and autoimmune disease (Lupus)."

Roberts went on to explain there are effective treatments for PTSD, including talk therapy or exposure therapy (where a patient is led through the trauma to understand that the event is part of the past and not in the present). Another treatment is prescription medication on its own or in combination with talk or psychotherapy.

Dog carrying American flag (source)

HOW K9S FOR WARRIORS IS SAVING LIVES

Take Me from the Shelter's Cage

According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), 670,000 dogs are euthanized each year in the United States. “We take shelter or rescue dogs and turn them into warriors,” says Duval. K9s For Warriors rescues dogs from animal shelters across the United States, particularly local ones including the Alachua County Humane Society, Putnam County Shelter, and Lake City County Shelter.

It takes K9s For Warrior six months to train a dog. They train a total of 120 dogs per year. They rescue most breeds except full-bred Pitbulls, Dobermans, Chow Chows, Rottweilers, or Dalmatians due to insurance restrictions or state sanctions. The service dogs have full public access (with papers) but are not emotional support dogs or pets.

Once the dogs are fully trained, they are ready to be paired with their warrior. As Duval says, “When the dog’s healthy, the warrior is healthy.”

As of May 2018, K9s has rescued 870 dogs with 434 dogs becoming service dogs, and the remaining rescues placed for adoption with loving families.

K9s For Warriors Training Program

I Got Your 6

The K9s For Warriors program trains rescue or shelter dogs to perform four specific tasks: averting panic attacks, waking warriors from nightmares, creating personal space comfort zones in public situations by standing in front of the veteran (barrier) and reminding warriors to take their medications.

Dogs also learn two other commands: brace and cover. Many warriors suffer physical disabilities as well, so the brace command prepares the dog to assist the warrior with standing, sitting or kneeling. The cover command is used to cover the warrior’s back.

Many soldiers with PTSD do not like people coming up from behind them. In the field, soldiers say to one another, “I got your back” or “I got your 6.” The cover command does just that. The service dog literally becomes the warrior’s sixth sense, by sitting and facing the opposite way the warrior is facing. When someone approaches from behind, the dog wags its tail.

According to Moira Smith of the ASPCA, service animals can also boost the handler’s social and emotional life, in addition to providing safety and autonomy in public. “The dog acts as a bridge for social interaction,” says Smith. She explains that most Americans can’t relate to war experiences, but they are familiar with taking care of a dog as a pet. “It also adds another dimension to their identity.”

Brett Simon of K9s For Warriors with a warrior

Dogs and Warriors Together: Let the Healing Begin

The three-week program is open to veterans or military members who became disabled while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces on or after 9/11. The program costs \$27,000 per participant but at no cost to the warrior. If one cannot cover travel costs, K9s pays for travel to and from the facility. To Duval, every military member or veteran who walks through her door is family and is treated with honor and respect. “We bring the warrior home to heal, to a place to regroup, to hit the reset button,” says Duval.

To qualify, a warrior must submit an application and have a verified clinical diagnosis of PTSD, TBI, or MST. All applications go through a full vetting process that takes 2-4 weeks to complete. During that time, a trained service dog is identified that matches the applicant's specific situation and needs. The organization stays in constant contact with applicants throughout the entire application process, including after approval or while a warrior is put on the waiting list. The waiting period is currently one year.

The dog doesn't know or care about their diagnoses - they love the handler unconditionally -- Moira Smith of the ASPCA

If accepted into the program, the warrior must reside at Camp K9, the organization's Florida facility, for three weeks. There is one program per month with 12 warriors in attendance. Warriors arrive on a Sunday and are introduced to their canine warriors within 24 hours. "After that, you go nowhere without your dog," says Simon.

K9s For Warriors believes their program is unique. In addition to matching warriors with service dogs and providing training, certifications, seminars, legal instruction, and housing, they also offer what Duval calls "wrap-around services." These include lifelong health care and food for the service dogs and ongoing unconditional love and support of the warrior pair.

Marine and service dog at K9s For Warriors headquarters

The program includes grooming, health care, and command classes, among others. Public access classes take warriors out in public with their dogs, to Costco, to the Jacksonville Zoo, to downtown St. Augustine or a restaurant. "They go to places in a high-stress environment to force them to use their dogs," says Simon. At the end of the program, warriors and their dogs go to a local park and practice all the commands. Before graduating, the pairs take a Public Access test regulated by the Assistance Dogs International (ADI).

ADI sets the standards for training guide, hearing, and service dogs. Sheila O'Brien, the President of the North America Chapter, says, "This is a rigorous process, holding organizations to the highest standards." According to O'Brien, the committee was formed (with ADI) nine years ago to look at programs that are placing dogs with vets and persons with PTSD to develop best practices.

She went on to explain that the initial purpose of ADI was to meet the physical needs of veterans. "After speaking with vets, we understood they could handle the physical disabilities, but it was the PTSD that was with them 24/7, and that's where the service dogs provided the most value."

There are now 72 ADI-accredited programs throughout North America with a total of 17,502 service dog teams formed from accredited programs. Each team must be recertified every five years.

K9s For Warriors headquarters built and donated by Summit Contracting

We Are Family

Duval is all about family and serving those she vehemently sees as our nation's greatest asset: our country's military members.

Each month, a new family is formed when a warrior takes his or her first step onto the grounds at Camp K9 in Florida. In addition to meeting their dog and dog trainer, warriors meet the "Housemoms," volunteers who stay in the facility day and night and talk with the warriors about everyday things instead of their military service.

The Housemoms run errands, grocery shop, and take warriors on outings. After graduation, Housemoms continue to stay in touch with the warriors by phone and on social media.

Apart from the Housemoms, K9s For Warriors relies heavily on its volunteers, local businesses, and support from Florida's veteran community. Many of the meals donated to the program come from local restaurants, neighbors, and organizations. Whether it be offering emotional aid to our veterans or helping with kennel enrichment, K9s is readily available to accept new Volunteer Ambassadors.

Service dogs are prescriptions on four legs -- Shari Duval

At the start, K9s For Warriors operated out of two houses with the dogs in the garages and vets sleeping on couches. "Then our humble beginnings were transformed by Summit Contracting. They believed in our program and built us a beautiful 17,000 square foot facility on nine acres. It was the most incredible gift in the world" said Simon.

In 2017, Steve Gold and family, gifted The Gold Family Campus to K9s For Warriors. The campus is a 67-acre property featuring a 9-bedroom and 7-bath house. It will be powered by solar panels (worth \$1 million), making the campus energy-independent. The facility is currently under construction and will be operational in 2019.

It will allow four more veterans to attend each monthly program, bringing the total number of warriors graduating per month to 16. The campus will also function as the primary facility for female military members and veterans.

An additional facility means more space for Duval and Simon to save lives.

Serviceman shaking paw of service dog (source)

STANDING TOGETHER FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

There are good things in K9s For Warriors' future.

As previously stated, Dr. O'Haire is partnering again with K9s For Warriors on a more extensive study funded by NIH. The findings will be published in 2019.

The VA is also running a Congressionally-mandated PTSD service dog study that will be completed in 2019. A total of 180 veterans have received either a service dog or an emotional support dog as part of the study. According to a VA spokesperson, after peer reviews, the VA will submit the study and results to the National Academy of Sciences for review, as required by the authorizing legislation (Section 1077 of the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act).

On the legislative side, Simon is working to secure public access identification from Service Dog Credentials, so K9s For Warriors' service dogs will be recognized by airlines, hotels, and restaurants, bypassing the need for the warriors to provide paperwork

or visit the disability office.

The future for K9s For Warriors looks promising as Duval and Simon continue to fight to save lives, both of soldiers and their canine warriors.

Because together, they stand.

For more information on PTSD treatment options, visit the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, PTSD: National Center for PTSD or the DoD, which encourages service members to ask for help by affirming that seeking help is actually a sign of strength.

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