

WONDER DOGS

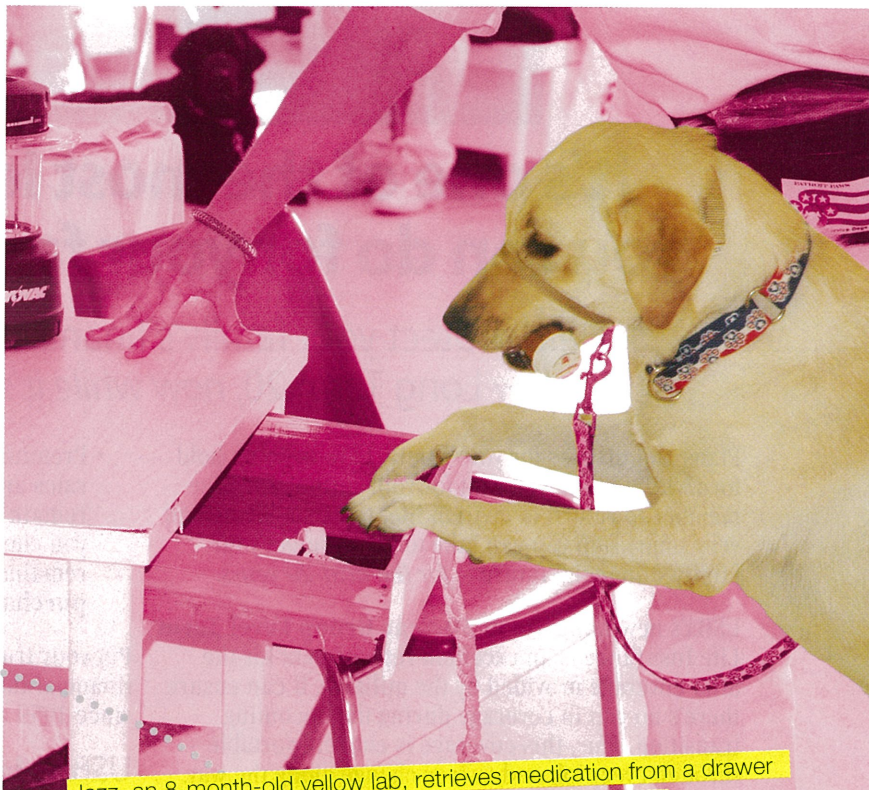
Dogs heal vets and prisoners through unique program.

By Heidi Evans

Just over the hill from Fort Hood, women prisoners are toiling to bring healing to injured veterans in the form of loving service dogs.

The women are serving time for a variety of offenses, many related to drugs and alcohol. Within the Crain Unit correctional facility, eighteen women sleep and work in an open room with little privacy, traveling outdoors to walk the dogs. Day and night they dutifully train dogs, mostly golden and black labs.

Using food and pounds of patience, the women teach the dogs to do everything from summoning help to making a bed. After about 18 months, the dogs can open doors, retrieve medication, and fetch an 18-pound artificial limb. Some dogs can retrieve a bottled beverage from a closed refrigerator. ▶



Jazz, an 8-month-old yellow lab, retrieves medication from a drawer under the watchful guidance of trainer Nicole Montignani.

Though not disabled, prisoners familiarize the dogs with wheelchairs and other mobility aids. Here 2-year-old Zoe Renée gets a cell phone from a backpack and hands it to trainer Jean Johnson.



CRUCIAL PARTNERSHIPS

The program is the product of a partnership between the nonprofit organization Patriot PAWS and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The training is supervised by PAWS founder Lori Stevens, who was honored for her work in 2009 by the American Legion Auxiliary as Woman of the Year.

Lori retired from training dogs professionally to care for her father, who was a vet. She started the program after vets from the VA hospital in Dallas asked her to help them train their dogs. ▶

A HERO'S HELPER

Their work made a huge difference for Sgt. Clay Rankin (Ret.) a decorated veteran of both the Gulf and Iraq wars. After heroic actions, Rankin suffered PTSD and spinal and traumatic brain injury. During Rankin's visit to the prison, a black lab named Archie chose Rankin as his master.

"Before I got Archie, I couldn't leave the house," Rankin said.

As well as helping with mobility, Archie aided PTSD symptoms by alerting Rankin if someone approached and waking him from nightmares. Archie sensed Rankin's flashbacks and licked or poked him to help Rankin refocus.

"Prior to Archie, I was existing and with Archie I was living," Rankin said.

Rankin is an advocate for wounded veterans, and visited hospitals with Archie. During one memorable visit, the dog helped a vet smile for the first time in months.

Rankin's wife of 25 years, Stephanie, said she didn't realize her husband's mobility was sliding severely because Archie "picked up the slack."

Archie was honored in November 2009 with the Dog of the Year award from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Two weeks later the 8-year-old dog suffered a heart attack and died.

"He became part of my body and part of my soul," said Clay Rankin. "When he died, a little bit of me died with him."

Now Clay Rankin will put the finishing polish on Patriot Paws' dogs, conditioning them to mobility tools like a Segway, before they go to another vet. He is reluctant to build a bond with a new dog.

Rankin's wife hopes there will be another dog someday. Stephanie says the dogs create miraculous changes. Many soldiers who were barricaded in their homes have returned to life.

"This has turned into this amazing thing," Stephanie said. MSM



Justice retrieves an 18-pound prosthetic. This allows an injured vet to dress or recover from a fall without help from others.



On command, 18-month-old Justice leaps on the lap of trainer Valerie Fry. This position allows a disabled vet to attach a harness, which can help the vet with balance and stability while walking next to the dog.

"This has turned into this amazing thing."

For more information on Patriot Paws, see their web site at WWW.PATRIOTPAWS.ORG.

LEARN MORE ONLINE

▶ “When I am sitting across from a vet who says ‘I wouldn’t be alive today without this dog,’” says Lori, she finds the motivation to continue. Tales of dogs fetching phones to help vets in trouble, or vets who didn’t have to spend a night on the bathroom floor until help arrived move her.

Patriot Paws is run entirely on donations. Unlike other service dog programs, the veterans receive the dogs for free if they participate in training programs. A service dog can easily cost \$20,000 to train.

EARNING RESPECT, MAKING AMENDS

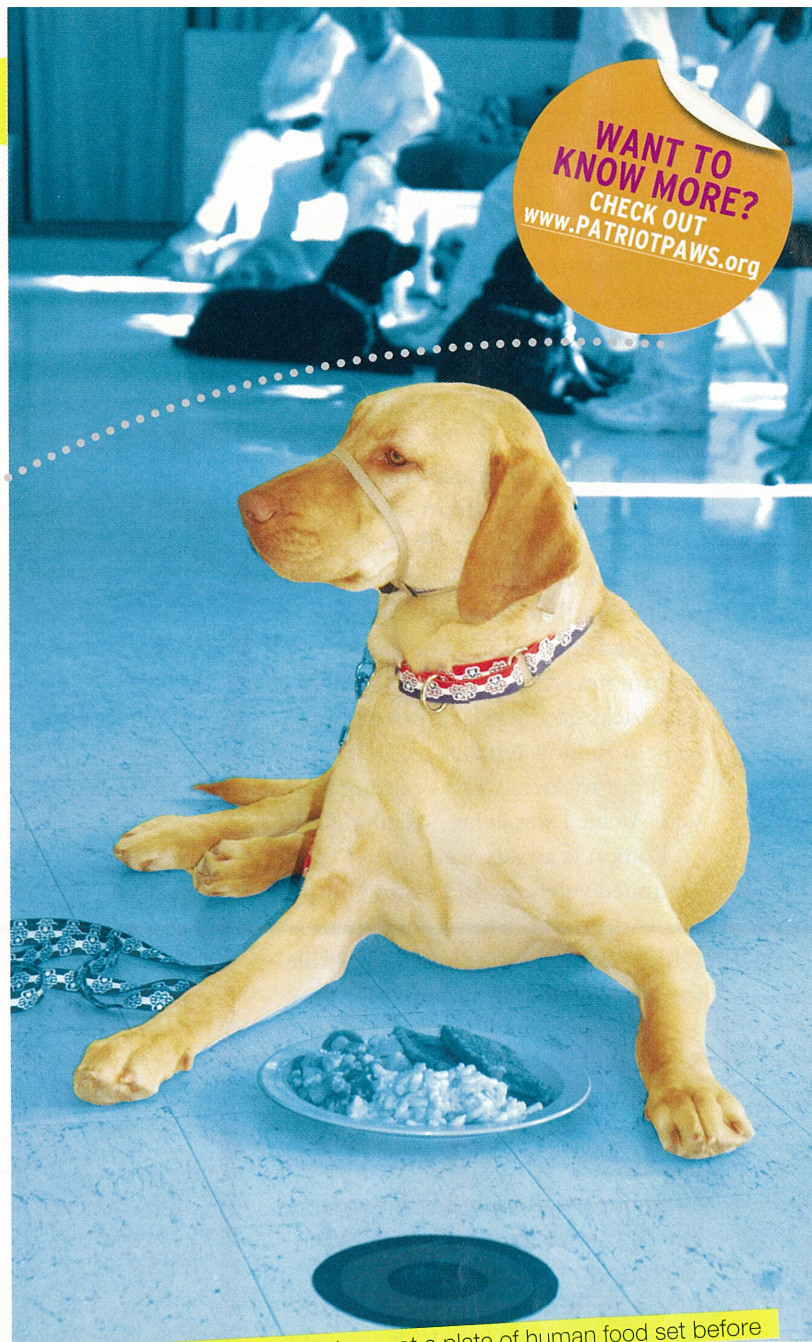
The prisoners say the program was far more work than they expected, but worthwhile because they are regaining respect.

“There is no way I can make amends to all the people I hurt. This gives me a way,” said Dianna Biscamp, who has a special touch with puppies.

For Valerie Fry, it’s a connection to her late father, an injured vet.

For Leslie Karkosky, the training helps her feel connected to the military career she wanted and will never have. “I abused my freedom,” she said. “Doing this I feel like I’m whole again.”

When prisoners visit town to train the dogs, adults thank them and children call them “karate dog ladies” for their white prison uniforms and black treat belts. ▶



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www.PATRIOTPAWS.org

Harley Davidson is so well trained, he doesn't even glance at a plate of human food set before him. This is critical because he is also trained to open a closed refrigerator to retrieve beverages.

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miraculous changes.
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were barricaded in
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DID YOU
KNOW?

Because of their high aptitude and willingness to please, Labradors excel as guide dogs for the blind, members of search-and-rescue teams and narcotics search dogs. Incredibly family-friendly and intelligent, they also remain the most popular breed in the United States.