



Retired veteran Alan White uses his emotional support dog Szva ("Zeeva") to help him train other dogs with WhiteHaven Canine Evaluators. White also is working to train and pair dogs with veterans who have PTSD. Photo by Rebekah McReynolds.

# Canine Trainer Helping Dogs, Veterans

By Tonya Warren

Oh, that we would all be fortunate enough to have our loved one gaze longingly into our eyes and be completely content with head scratches and belly rubs.

Meet Szva (pronounced "Zeeva"), an almost 7-year-old sleek German shepherd who adores her human dad and veteran, Alan White. That feeling is mutual and evident as White gently plays with Szva's ears, calling her a "princess who loves her Daddy." Szva doesn't wear a tiara, instead, she's a princess who enjoys an occasional mutt muffin while sporting a working vest with her name imprinted on the side.

White's idea of wanting an emotional

support canine came when he was on his back recovering from injuries received while fighting in the Vietnam War. Handlers would bring in dogs to visit wounded Marines in Bethesda Naval Hospital, and unlike many of the injured in the hospital ward, White had no family visiting.

"I always noticed the dogs would make their way towards me," he said. "Seeing the dogs, talking to them and loving on them did more good for me than my own therapy and medications."

Their calming presence, kind eyes and wagging tails made such an impression on him, he was determined to

someday have his own support dog to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

White recovered from his injuries and worked various military jobs in which he trained and handled five dogs as a patrol and bomb explosives dog handler. After stints with the U.S. Embassy in foreign countries, he ended his service with HMX-1, the presidential helicopter squadron.

Waco became home for White where he worked at the VA before retiring in 2016. Not one to desire the so-called golden years in a rocking chair front and center of the TV, he decided to open WhiteHaven Canine Evaluators.

22 [AUGUST 2021] wacotrib.com/wacotoday

It was a natural choice given his background in working with dogs.

Szva is the ninth German shepherd White has owned and trained, and her patient, calm demeanor and intelligence make her an important partner when dog obedience classes are taught, he said.

Well-behaved dogs are an asset to their family and the community at large, White said. Anxious and aggressive dogs are dangerous and present a liability for owners. WhiteHaven has basic and advanced obedience classes available and puppies may begin their own special sessions from 4 months old to 1 year of age.

WhiteHaven also teaches owners how to work with their adult and senior dogs. Dog owner Carol McGrew said she was apprehensive because her 11-month-old dog, Sergeant, was aggressive and had not been leash-trained.

"After the second lesson, Sergeant



Dogs in a training class lie down on cots as they are taught the down/slay command. Photo by Alan White.

performed well," McGrew said. "Alan works with each dog and owner as individuals, and they learn on their own level."

Therapy dog training is also available for those wanting to take their dog into

the likes of nursing homes, universities and hospice units.

Chelsey Crye and her dog Riley

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attended the required classes to become a therapy team.

“Alan not only helped improve the relationship I have with my dog, he’s allowed us to maximize our potential,” she said.

Residents and staff at Living Springs Village enjoy seeing Crye and Riley every week, and Crye added that “we get to make a positive difference in the lives of others in our community.”

## Save a Dog, Help a Veteran

White has a special place in his heart for veterans as well as dogs, and last year he obtained three dogs from BARK (Bosque Animal Rescue Kennels) in Clifton and trained them in basic and advanced obedience classes.

He then donated the dogs to military veterans who suffer from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Social workers at the VA give White names of veterans whom they believe would benefit from an emotional support animal.

White also checks out potential dogs weekly at the Humane Society of Central Texas in Waco. His goal is to save dogs from euthanasia for training and placement in veterans’ lives.

Desiring to acquire more dogs to train and provide to veterans was proving to be challenging, both financially and logistically. Expenses for the dogs came out of White’s pocket, and since WhiteHaven didn’t have a designated facility, keeping the dogs kenneled during the training period was difficult.

“There’s got to be a better way,” White said he believed.

## Capital Campaign

Right before COVID-19 struck last year, White had an idea to establish a nonprofit side of his canine business. Originally, the idea was to obtain corporate funding and grants, but the virus had other plans, and incoming funds dried up.

White had begun searching for a piece of land in 2018 to build a training facility, and recently the nonprofit was able to secure 1½ acres that includes a metal



Alan White (left) walks with Szva along with other owners and their dogs as they work on socialization by having the canines walk in close quarters to other dogs. Photo by Sherry Fair.

building.

He expects to get possession of the land on Aug. 1. The building will need renovations, but he hopes to be operating out of the facility by the end of September.

In the meantime, he’ll continue to train from the back of his truck, he said with a laugh.

The nonprofit has six board members and three advisory team members. All have a connection to the military and a devotion to veterans and dogs. They are enthusiastic about a strong lead on a piece of land with a building already on site.

Board President Tim Childress said, “I spent 30 years in the military, and I’ve got a deep heart for vets, dogs and shelters.” He added, “We hope everyone can give to this very worthwhile campaign.”

White said the racial diversity of the board is important.

“Everyone knows there’s all colors in the military,” he said. “In the military everyone’s green because that’s the military color.”


The capital campaign goal is \$450,000 and money raised will fund building infrastructure updates, various flooring needed for dog training, heating and air conditioning, and agility courses.

White is adamant about not taking

a salary; he wants the money earned from classes to go directly back into the mission of training dogs for placement with a veteran. WhiteHaven also funds dog expenses before placement such as spaying or neutering and vaccinations.

By having its own facility, White will no longer have to travel all over Waco and four counties. Clients and dogs will travel to him, allowing him to save much time and gas. Thus, more time and money will be available for acquiring and training dogs to make a difference in the life of a veteran, he said.

White hopes to train five dogs every quarter for placement in a home whose owner has served the country. A 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report said 22 veterans commit suicide each day.

White views his dog training work as a mission to save both veterans and their tail-wagging furry canine companions. 

## WhiteHaven Canine Evaluators

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