

Puppies Behind Bars

Winter 2014/2015

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Photo: Peggy Vance

PUPPIES BEHIND BARS trains prison inmates to raise service dogs for wounded war veterans and explosive-detection canines for law enforcement. The puppies live in prison with their "puppy raisers" from the age of 8 weeks to 24 months. As the puppies mature into well-loved, well-behaved dogs, their raisers learn what it means to contribute to society rather than take from it.

— Shadow's Light —

Gary Aurigemma became a puppy-raiser in the P.B.B. program in March 2004. He had just been denied parole, after serving the minimum time for his 15-to-life sentence for murder. This is his story:

When I was 18 years old, I had an argument with a family friend, lost my temper, and made a horrible decision that cost that person their life. I spent my first few years in prison feeling lost, not really moving in any direction either emotionally or spiritually. I knew deep down inside that I had to change myself if I ever wanted a chance to someday get out of prison, and even more importantly, stay out.



Photo: Peggy Vance

I'd grown up in a good home, but for most of my childhood we moved often, and I was never able to become close to anyone outside of my family. I skipped school a lot because I had a deep fear of being around people. I could never seem to understand how to make connections with them. I could not understand why someone I did not know would smile at me or try to talk to me. It would frighten and confuse me. My inability to talk and interact with others often left me angry and frustrated.

In prison, I finally started participating in programs that would force me to engage with people, and that would give me the opportunity to help others. Nevertheless, it often bothered me that I did not really enjoy what I was doing. I didn't want to do these things, I did them because I felt I had to, both for myself and as a way to try to repay, in some small measure, for the life I had taken.

One day, not long after I was transferred to the Mid-Orange prison, I saw puppies in the yard. I had not seen a dog in almost 15 years and spent the afternoon talking with

a couple of the puppy-raisers and playing with the dogs. Not long after, I took a job where I worked in the same office as one of the raisers and his puppy, Maggie. Over the next few months I fell in love with Maggie and was amazed at her raiser's dedication to the training that was required. I was also consumed with the idea of having a friend that I could finally relate to without fear, namely a puppy. Although I badly wanted to join P.B.B., I was not able to do so for almost a year. It is a requirement of P.B.B. that raisers have at least two years before their earliest possible release in order to apply to the program. This is so raisers will have enough time to completely raise a puppy. I was scheduled to see my first parole board in less than a year. If I did not make parole then I would have two years before my next parole board hearing, and thus enough time before release to apply to the program.

I waited anxiously for the next nine months to pass in order to go to my first parole

— continued on page 4

Angels in Afghanistan



Photos: Andrea Baker

A SECOND P.B.B. PUP HAS GONE TO AFGHANISTAN TO WORK with an Army chaplain. Zac, a Lab named in honor of fallen airman **Zachary Cuddeback**, is currently stationed in Kandahar with Captain **Andrea Baker**, who shares him with another chaplain, Captain **Josh Morris**. (Newsletter readers who missed the spring 2013 story about **Karen Hallett's** tour of duty in Afghanistan with a P.B.B.-trained dog, Zoe, can find their extraordinary tale of love, courage, and healing on the P.B.B. website.)

"Zac is doing great," Baker emailed P.B.B. recently. "He received a certificate of appreciation from our battalion commander

and continues to raise morale all over Kandahar Airfield. Our aviation battalion, Josh's engineer battalion, Marines, other Army units, hospital patients and staff, Department of the Army civilians and civilian contractors, Aussies, Brits — everyone loves him and his sweet, mellow demeanor."

When they return, Zac will be part of an initiative started by Baker's church in California, which aims to help veterans with P.T.S.D. come to terms with their wounds through writing about their experiences. Zac's grammar may be iffy, but his presence will continue to heal veterans in need.

P A W S F O R A P P L A U S E

MCGILVERY'S MARK

The hugely talented **Kathy McGilvery**, who has been responsible for the design of P.B.B.'s newsletters, calendars, invitations, and brochures since its founding 18 years ago, is finally stepping back from her pro-bono work

"It was always exciting to see what Kathy came up with, and she truly felt the power of the stories we were trying to tell," says newsletter editor **Elise O'Shaughnessy**. "We were incredibly lucky to have had Kathy's expertise and design genius," adds P.B.B. president **Gloria Gilbert Stoga**, "and we will always be in her debt for making us look so good for so many years."

PUPS ON THE MOVE

Since the spring newsletter went to press, 18 P.P.B. puppies have begun their important work. In August, four Marines went through an intensive 16-day "team training" before heading home with their new Dog Tags service dogs: puppy Ariel accompanied John home to Colorado; George is serving in Tennessee with Chris; Spirit is in California with Rafeal; and Albee now lives with Al in Maine.

Fourteen dogs, raised at Edna Mahan

Correctional Facility in New Jersey or at the Federal Correctional Facility at Danbury, Connecticut, passed all their tests and training to become explosive-detection canines (E.D.C.s). Their assignments will make them a far-flung group, from Daisy in Bahrain to Doc in Missouri. All the E.D.C.s live at home with their handlers as part of the family, and work each day to protect the public. Their successes are testament to the hard work of P.B.B.'s inmate puppy-raisers and our large network of volunteers.

DIRECTORS' VISION

Two longtime members of the board of directors, **Cynthia Mas** and **Bonnie McCausland**, reached their term limits this year. Their contributions as board members — everything from offering advice and guidance to constantly spreading the word about P.B.B.'s work — have been substantial and both will be greatly missed.



for the organization. Her crisp, award-winning style has been P.B.B.'s calling card in mailing after mailing, and her commitment was an inspiration to all who worked with her.

Almost two decades later, P.B.B. has succeeded beyond anything I could have imagined. It has unleashed the healing Power of Dog in so many ways and for so many people that I remain in awe. The pups have wiggled and wagged their way around some of the toughest places in the world: prisons, veterans' hospitals, domestic violence agencies, war zones, and the homes of elderly shut-ins. Always, despair has lifted in their presence.

These dogs have literally saved lives, by sniffing out bombs and cuddling up next to soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder. They have helped amputees become independent. The stories I could tell (and often do tell, writing for this newsletter) still knock my socks off. Gloria starts choking up sometimes, when she talks about the work these dogs do, and we tease her about that. But I don't believe there's a single P.B.B. volunteer or staff member who hasn't come close to tears on more than one occasion.

Once the program launched in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in 1997, the P.B.B. board soon got a look at life in prison. The inmates who were raising our first puppies were young and old, black and white, plain and pretty. Most had committed serious crimes, for which they'd received lengthy sentences. All were fiercely devoted to the pups, and it was immediately obvious how grateful they were for the love they were getting from their canine charges.

It took longer for me to see the more profound effect of the program: the

"Why Not?" She Said

— by ELISE O'SHAUGHNESSY —

I was not a dog person when I joined the board of directors of a not-yet-up-and-running organization called Puppies Behind Bars. I had never been inside a prison. All I knew was that Gloria Gilbert Stoga was someone who Did Good Things — I'd worked with her at UNICEF — and she seemed to think I could help. Her plan was to train prison inmates to raise service dogs.

So, sure, why not? I'll join the board.

chance it gave the inmates to be of service. As one told me, some years later, "Every other prison program is about something being done for us. With P.B.B. we get to do something for someone else."

The program is now in six prisons across three states, and while a part of its mission has changed with the times—raising guide dogs gave way to raising explosive-detection canines and service dogs for the veterans of two wars—one core element remains the same: the miracles that take place behind those bars. In the men's prisons, the effect is even more startling to witness, as even the toughest-looking inmates give their whole hearts to the pups they are raising and training.

The support that P.B.B. has received from the former and current commissioners

of New York State's correctional facilities, Glenn Goord, Brian Fischer, and Anthony Annucci—men who possess a rare blend of toughness and compassion—says a great deal to me about the long-term impact of our prison programs. And I will always remember what the superintendent of one men's facility told me: "Most of these guys are going to leave here at some point. Anything that makes it less likely that they will be back has got to be a good thing."

P.B.B. does what it can to help inmate puppy-raisers when they leave prison. Several have joined the staff in our New York City office, and two have become valued instructors, returning to teach inmates

in the correctional system where they served their time. But the transition to "normal life" is never easy.

If an inmate is to succeed in life after incarceration, what he or she needs most is an inner strength that prison rarely builds—and that many of us take for granted: the sense of self-worth that comes from loving, being loved, and doing something for someone else. This has been the consistent gift of Puppies Behind Bars, and it's one reason I continue to feel greatly privileged to play a small part in its mission.

O'Shaughnessy's essay was adapted from an article that appeared alongside Gary Aurigemma's story in the recent "Redemption, Reconciliation & Forgiveness" issue of *The Episcopal New Yorker*.

DONATION FORM

Please accept my donation for:

- Hotel room for one veteran during 16 days of "team training" (\$2,720)
- Routine veterinary care for one puppy for a year (\$850)
- One service dog vest with patches (\$100)
- A new sleeping crate (\$85)
- Food for a puppy for one month (\$70)
- Hands-free lead for a service dog trainer (\$30)
- New toys for one puppy (\$10)
- Other amount \$ _____

Please charge my credit card:

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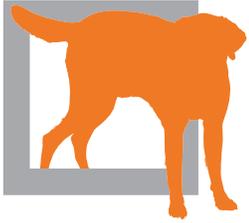
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hearing. I had no expectation of being released. Instead, I was totally consumed with applying to become a puppy-raiser. The day that I received my denial of parole, I dropped my P.B.B. application in the mailbox. The following week I was interviewed and accepted into the program. I worked hard for the next few months learning all that the P.B.B. instructor had to teach me, and after several months I was finally rewarded with the greatest gift I have ever received: my first puppy, Shadow.

For ten years, I helped train numerous puppies to be explosive-detection canines for law enforcement, service dogs for disabled veterans, and companions for children with autism. These dogs, and through them, this program, helped me become the person I am today. In order to help the pups succeed, I needed not only to learn how to work and communicate with others, I also had to want to do these things. The pups gave me the confidence to overcome my fear of interacting with others. They showed me how to not take myself so seriously and actually enjoy being part of a team. They taught me how to be patient.



Photo: P.B.B.

The P.B.B. staff gave me the opportunity to grow and become a leader to other men in the program—to help fellow inmates learn the same lessons I had learned and grow to become better men themselves. I was given the gift of knowing that my second dog, Jordan, changed the life of the young autistic boy he went to, as well as that of the boy's family. I was given the chance to help train a couple of dozen disabled veterans, and the gift of seeing some of these veterans come back into prison and speak about how the dogs are

restoring their lives. I was also given the gift of knowing that through this program I have been able to positively touch the lives of possibly thousands of people.

I was denied parole four more times. There were moments I felt that I would never get out. Often, in my mind, I would see parole as a sign of a sort of final forgiveness for what I had done, and therefore would equate the denial of parole with a refusal of forgiveness. Thankfully these feelings did not come often or last long. Deep down, I already knew that forgiveness had already been granted. The sign was this wonderful program, both its puppies and people, which has allowed me to become the person I wish I had been 26 years ago.

This past February I was given parole. I was also given the opportunity to continue doing what had changed me so much—working with Puppies Behind Bars. I am now an administrative assistant for P.B.B. and I often get to work with some of our pups when they are brought into New York City. Every day is an opportunity to help others and enjoy myself as I am doing it.

*Aurigemma's story was adapted from an article that appeared in the recent "Redemption, Reconciliation & Forgiveness" issue of *The Episcopal New Yorker*.*