

Puppies Behind Bars



Photos: Peggy Vance

Summer 2015

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.

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A Dog Worth Fighting For

When Jonathan Bittner returned from Afghanistan in 2008, he didn't think he was different—he thought everyone around him had changed. But eight months later, one of the men in his unit told their commander he was concerned about Bittner. "That's what introduced me to P.T.S.D.," the 27-year-old veteran recalls.

His diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder was a relief, because now Bittner knew what was happening to him. But it also forced him to take medical retirement. "My life went downhill fast," he says.

He had enlisted after high school for several reasons: His dad, his uncles, and his grandfather all had been in the military. His country had been attacked on 9/11. He didn't want to go to college right away.

And serving in Afghanistan was hugely satisfying for an idealistic, action-loving young man. "I was really proud of what I was doing over there and the guys I was with were amazing," he says. "It was really fast-paced." At the end of his tour, he didn't want to leave.

Back home—without the camaraderie, the purpose, and the excitement—sadness crept in. "I thought about all the guys who got killed in Afghanistan," he remembers. "I felt guilty I was still alive and they were not." His medical discharge was a huge blow. "I felt like the military was my whole life. It was something I loved, and I lost it. I had to start all over again and figure out what I wanted to do."

It has not been easy. Six years later, Bittner is still struggling, but he has a new comrade in the effort to put his life back on track: a black Lab named Annie, who was raised in



Photo: Jonathan Bittner

Jonathan Bittner and Annie at home, May 2015

the Puppies Behind Bars program at Fishkill Correctional Facility in New York. Annie and Bittner graduated as a team in August 2013, after 16 days of intense training that involved working with the inmates who were Annie's puppy-raisers.

Bittner had been skeptical when his therapist first suggested he apply for a service dog. "I saw a lot of service dogs not behaving in public and that brought on more stress to the vets who had them," he says. The doctor kept pressing him, though, so Bittner did some research. Online videos showed him how much help the right dog could be, and the professionalism he encountered in the interview process with P.B.B. impressed him. He took the plunge.

— continued on next page

Bittner and Annie bonded right away. When he arrived home with his new companion, he was both scared and excited: "I was scared because I knew my life was going to change in a big way with having Annie. I knew I had to be responsible, like a parent. I knew how I was living wasn't working and I felt like this was my last chance, so I was willing to make the change. It was a huge step.

"Annie had a big impact on my life almost immediately. She had become my best friend who I could tell anything to and she wouldn't judge me. She also got me into a routine where I would be in bed by 10:00 p.m. and wake up at 7:00 a.m. For years I was so used to being up all night and sleeping all day, which was affecting my health.

"I got more involved in veterans' events and began speaking about P.T.S.D. and

P.T.S.D. treatment. Annie accompanied him. But this past winter, after one of his friends killed himself, he began another downward spiral. "I stopped taking care of myself," he recalls. "I cancelled my appointments with my therapist because I did not want to talk. I stayed in my house. I began self-medicating to try to deal with everything."

Back into in-patient care he went, this time with greater focus—and without the dog. "I knew that if I didn't get help, I would lose Annie," he says. While he completed the two-month program, Annie stayed with a good friend. "I thought it would be better not to have Annie [with me]," he explains, "because having Annie with me meant I would focus a lot of attention on her every day—grooming, exercising, feeding—instead of putting 100% of my effort into me."

His treatment completed, the reunion with

the P.B.B. staff. "It's great to see an organization that really cares about their dogs," he says. "Most importantly, P.B.B. has become my family. I'm so thankful that they didn't just give me a dog and send me on my way."

Then there is the issue of potential employers, who don't always take the right (or legal) attitude toward a veteran with a service dog. "It has been extremely difficult to find a job," Bittner reports. "I never realized how hard it would be. A few companies that I applied for viewed Annie as a liability issue. There was one that was willing to hire me but it wouldn't have been a good fit to work there with Annie." Bottom line: he won't trade Annie for a job.

"Annie is my world and the pros of having Annie heavily outweigh the cons. I can't imagine life without her." Recently, he returned to the Fishkill prison to thank

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Photos: Peggy Vance

Saluting each other at graduation, August 11, 2013

about how my life has been with Annie. Annie opened the door for me to make very special friendships." And she reconnected Bittner with his family. "I started visiting my parents more, once I had her. We had Annie in common, so that brought us together."

But life with Annie wasn't all smooth sailing. Buoyed by the dog's presence, sleeping better, and feeling less anxiety, Bittner stopped taking his meds when his V.A. psychiatrist went into private practice. "I did not have insurance so I could not follow him," he explains. "He was one of the few psychiatrists I felt comfortable with, so when he left, I felt there was no one to take his place. So I let my prescriptions run out."

Soon, Bittner was in need of in-patient



Bittner and Annie, center, with the rest of their graduating class. August 1, 2013

his dog was joyous: "I was so happy and excited to be able to hold her again, to play with her again, to take care of her again." But Annie's love and support come with a price.

First there are P.B.B.'s stringent requirements of the veterans who are partnered with its dogs. "The rules about having one of our dogs are really strict," says its president, Gloria Gilbert Stoga. "You have to exercise her for at least an hour a day, you have to stay in touch with us, you have to be re-tested and recertified with her annually, you have to keep her weight within three pounds of what it was when you got her. I could go on and on."

Bittner has no problem with that oversight, largely because of the support he gets from

the inmates who raised her. He wanted them to understand the difference they make in other people's lives, "whether they see it or not."

"I feel like I owe the guys—and P.B.B. as a whole," he explains, "because I know I wouldn't be where I am now if it weren't for P.B.B. I remember the first day of 'team training'; walking into the prison I was very anxious, nervous, and stressed out. When I just went back to visit, I was excited, happy, and I couldn't wait to see the guys. One of the things I remember most is that one of the puppy-raisers told me he didn't recognize me because I was so different. I was happier, I'd lost weight, I talked more."

As the U.S. draws down in Iraq and

Afghanistan, many veterans from those wars—especially those with the “invisible wounds” of P.T.S.D. and T.B.I.—are still fighting to get back on their feet. Bittner’s experience is that it can be a long road to recovery, filled with ups and downs. He hopes America won’t forget about its veterans. “The wars aren’t over for those who served,” he says.

He himself has become active in different organizations, especially in the veteran community. “Annie opened doors for me to go out and get involved,” he says. “I wish every veteran suffering from P.T.S.D. or T.B.I. would be able to experience the life-changing effects of having a service dog. Taking a chance to love something again is worth it. A lot of the vets I talk to won’t allow themselves to get close to anyone or anything again. Taking that step of becoming

“One of the things I remember most is that one of the puppy-raisers told me he didn’t recognize me because I was so different.”

vulnerable, of loving and being loved, and taking a chance to be attached to something is the first step of the healing process.”



Photo: Jonathan Bittner

Jonathan, Annie, and a friend. May 2015

House of New Labs

How do you produce a better working dog?

For two decades, Puppies Behind Bars has been asking this question, as the organization evolved in different, sometimes unexpected, ways. Staff, inmates, and volunteers take enormous pride in the quality of the almost 950 dogs that they have trained and in the difference the pups have made in people’s lives. But they never stop looking for ways to improve the process.

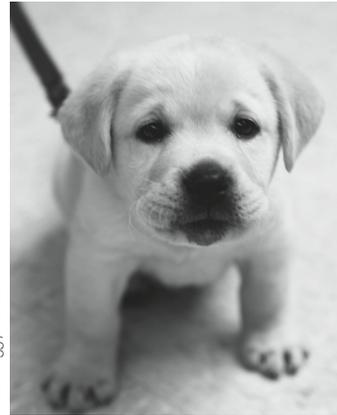


Photo: Peggy Vance

I have a lot of learning to do!

Which is why, last month, P.B.B. inaugurated the Scaife Family Foundation Early Socialization Center in upstate New York. The center will allow staff to begin working with puppies practically from birth.

“The idea is simple,” says P.B.B. founder and president Gloria Gilbert Stoga: “We have learned that providing early socialization experiences, even before the eight-week mark when puppies normally enter the prison programs, makes a critical difference.” At the Scaife Family Foundation Early Socialization Center, young Labrador Retrievers will be introduced to such things as car rides, children, other breeds of dogs, stairs, household sounds and smells, and different

“under footings” (e.g., carpet, linoleum, wood floors, gravel, grass, etc.).

“We know that the quicker puppies learn to navigate their world, the more confident they become as adult dogs,” Gilbert Stoga explains. “Car ride? Not scary: I’ve done that already. Children? Not scary: I remember the kids who came and played with me when I was a pup. Sudden noises, grocery stores, stairs? I did those things when I was just a wee little thing.”

The generosity of the Scaife Family Foundation, which has been a major supporter of Puppies Behind Bars for years, has enabled this important step. P.B.B. has purchased a house and land, and created a whole curriculum for when and how to expose its youngest puppies to different sights, sounds, and experiences. Nora Moran, director of the Dog Tags program, will live on the property.

Expectations for this effort are high. Confidence is essential to a successful working dog, and active socialization from the earliest possible age dramatically raises the odds of producing confident pups. The Scaife Family Foundation Early Socialization Center will significantly advance P.B.B.’s goal of providing the highest-quality service dogs to the wounded veterans who have given so much to our country, and top-notch explosive-detection canines to those who protect us every day.

DONATION FORM

Please accept my donation for:

- 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 \$ _____
- Earmark my funds for the Dog Tags challenge match \$ _____
(Through September 2015)

Please charge my credit card:

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- Please list name as it appears on card. List mailing address.

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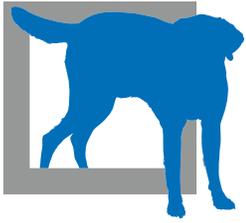
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P A W S F O R A P P L A U S E

Twenty puppies have graduated from P.B.B. since the beginning of 2015.

In February, five service dogs were paired with veterans, all of whom suffer the effects of P.T.S.D. Two of the dogs were paired with Marines: Honor joined Mario in New York, and Liberty is with Michael in Maryland. Marcus serves an Air Force veteran named Joshua in Colorado, while Levi is in Missouri with Army veteran Allen. Bramford went to Utah with Army veteran Kimberly, and Castle lives in Rhode Island with National Guard veteran Ulises.

Fourteen dogs have gone on to formal training with government agencies for work as explosive-detection canines. Bailey, Buddy, Cassia, Isabel, Jane, Margie, Max, Meadow, Oscar, Pasta, Riley, Shadow, Tucker, and Wrigley all will live with their dedicated handlers, and head off to work each day to protect the public. P.B.B. thanks the puppy-raisers, and its dedicated volunteers, for giving these dogs the foundation for their success.

Memorial Challenge

For the third consecutive year, the Samuel Freeman Charitable Trust has awarded P.B.B.



Photo Peggy Vance

Two recruits, ready to go!

a challenge grant to support the Dog Tags program for wounded Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. Given in honor of Memorial Day, the grant matches all donations earmarked for Dog Tags, up to \$75,000, through September. If you'd like to contribute, make your check payable to Puppies Behind Bars and write "Dog Tags" on the memo line.

Gator Aid

With fundraising dinners, t-shirt sales, a carnival, and a letter-writing campaign, student leaders at Gompers K-8 School in Lakewood, California raised \$7,500 this past year, enough to sponsor a P.B.B. pup—and then some. The kids were inspired by stories about how much dogs can help veterans who struggle with P.T.S.D. and other issues. They have decided to call the dog "Gator," after the school mascot.

A story in the local newspaper about their efforts noted that "fundraising for Puppies Behind Bars acquainted the Gompers students with aspects of finance, campaigning, and mental health." The kids watched a video about veterans coping with physical and mental injuries, which was eye-opening for seventh-grader Dominique Henry. "I never knew what P.T.S.D. was before," she told the Press Telegram. Thanks to these kids, not only does P.B.B. have funding for another dog, but an entire community has learned more about the serious challenges so many veterans face when they come home.