



Puppies  
Behind  
Bars



Staff Sergeant Allen Hill, U.S. Army Ret., with his service dog, Baron, and inmate puppy-raisers Christina and Kim. Photo: Scott Jansson

## THE McDONALD LEGACY



Top: At Bedford Hills, during the graduation ceremony where Heather McClelland was formally paired with McDonald, Crystal, the inmate who raised the dog, hands McClelland a record of his life so far. P.B.B.'s director of volunteers, Tito Tyson (center), was among the zoo in attendance.  
Bottom: Patti Ann McDonald, widow of the brave detective for whom the dog was named, hugs puppy-raiser Crystal, as her son, Conor, and New York State D.O.C.C.S. Commissioner Anthony Annucci (left) look on. Photos: Scott Jansson

As police forces around the country confront growing rates of suicide, depression, and P.T.S.D. in their ranks, Heather McClelland is bringing canine therapy to hers. McClelland, who is community liaison and Officer Wellness Program coordinator for the Groton Police Department, asked Puppies Behind Bars to pair her with a dog. A few months later, she and a black Lab named McDonald graduated from team training in the Bedford Hills prison, where the pup was raised.

The team of “Mac and Mac,” as they’re called, makes Groton one of the first forces in the country to use a therapy dog. “I’m so grateful to P.B.B. and the ladies at Bedford Hills for providing us with this opportunity to better serve our officers, first responders, and community,” McClelland says. “I can’t even put into words the impact that one little handsome dog has made on all of us!”

In his relatively short time with the Groton police force, McDonald has opened up more conversation about wellness, stress, and trauma. While everyone may know about the department’s standard employee assistance program, McClelland says, “McDonald is a tangible thing, a therapeutic tool with an instantaneous impact when you interact with him. I’ve received calls from officers all over the state asking me how to get a program started at their department. Likewise, in my own department, we are now talking about creating a wellness/meditation room. McDonald has been the catalyst for all of this.”

The story of this particular dog begins long before he was born, with his namesake: an N.Y.P.D. detective named Steven D. McDonald, who was shot and paralyzed in the line of duty in 1986. Overcoming the anger, bitterness, and depression that could have destroyed him, the detective chose not only to forgive the teenager who shot him, but to spend the rest of his life sharing his message of forgiveness.

This heroic man visited prisons, schools, and countless organizations, talking about the need to break the cycle of violence by breaking down the walls that separate people. He often quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., saying, “Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it’s a permanent attitude.”

One of the prisons Detective McDonald visited was Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, where many of the women who serve as puppy-raisers in the P.B.B. program were inspired by his message. After the detective’s death in January 2017,



McClelland and Crystal during team training. Left, McClelland learns that she's been paired with McDonald; right, she puts the pup through his paces.  
Photos: Scott Jansson

some of them suggested that a puppy in an upcoming litter be named McDonald, in his honor.

The canine McDonald was born that September, and placed in the care of puppy-raiser Crystal at Bedford Hills in November. During the course of McDonald's training, P.B.B. shared photos of the pup and quarterly "sponsor letters" from Crystal with officials at the N.Y.P.D. (see page 5 to learn more about sponsoring a puppy). The N.Y.P.D., in turn, shared these updates with Detective McDonald's widow, Patti Ann, and his son, Conor, who is now an N.Y.P.D. sergeant himself.

As the pup neared the point where he would be ready to go to work, P.B.B. was approached by Officer McClelland, who hoped that a service dog could offer comfort and support to the men and women of her department, particularly those who witnessed traumatic events. She also proposed using the dog out in the community, both to bridge the gap between police and civilians and to help people who have been victims of crime.

After 14 days of intensive "team training," McDonald was formally paired with McClelland at a moving ceremony at Bedford Hills last August. It was particularly gratifying for McClelland and the puppy-raisers that Patti Ann McDonald, Sergeant Conor McDonald, and many high-ranking officers and officials of the N.Y.P.D. attended the graduation. Their presence, and their warm words of gratitude and praise for the puppy-raisers, was a living embodiment of Detective McDonald's message of forgiveness as a "permanent attitude."

Since his graduation, McDonald the Lab has become an important presence at the Groton Police Department, and in the broader community. McClelland finds that people who might be wary of a police officer will approach her to greet

the dog. Her uniform all but disappears. Other municipalities have reached out for McDonald's help, and McClelland brought him to nearby New London on two occasions to comfort the family of victims of a triple murder.

According to McClelland, "As soon as we got home from team training in August, we hit the ground running. Over the past two months, we have participated in dozens of events, such as the Safe Futures Domestic Violence Awareness 4K, Babies Heart Ride, 9/11 Memorial Event, Grandparents Day.... There really are too many to name. Between all the people we meet and the media attention that has followed him, McDonald gets requests for visits on a daily basis."

Fortunately, McDonald's training, along with the innate desire of a Lab to please, make him the ideal candidate for this busy job. "McDonald just loves to work," McClelland reports. "Regardless of how busy we are or how many people I introduce him to in the course of a day... as soon as I say, 'Let's go!,' he's up and ready for his next task. This no doubt is a tribute to the blood, sweat, and tears Crystal and the other puppy-raisers put into his training. And he is so great with kids!"

And Groton Police Chief L. J. Fusaro, the pup's new boss, had this to say, "We are excited to have McDonald as part of our team and honored to be associated with Detective McDonald and his family. I am confident, after having met Patti Ann and Connor, that our McDonald will continue the legacy of his namesake—N.Y.P.D. Detective Steven McDonald."

Through all this, McClelland's biggest challenge has been to make sure to give McDonald time to just "be a dog." She's learned to look for clues that he's tired or overwhelmed. And she's experienced firsthand his healing power: "My life, my job, and my mental state have all improved because of him."

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## FINDING HER ANGEL

*Colonel Jeanne Meyer, U.S.A.F. Ret., and her dog, Angel, graduated as a team on August 15, in a ceremony at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Other military veterans and first responders with their service dogs were on the stage with Meyer that night. She gave the following address, which has been slightly adapted for print.*

My name is Jeanne Meyer. I retired from the Air Force three weeks ago, after 25-plus years of service as a judge advocate.

Somehow I ended up with the impossible task of trying to capture and put into words the thoughts and feelings of this unique group of people sitting up here with me tonight. Actually, I know how I ended up with this task—Gloria asked. And if you know Gloria [P.B.B. president Gloria Gilbert Stoga], you know that it's impossible not to say "yes" when she asks you to do something!

Collectively we wear or have worn eight different uniforms, held countless positions of responsibility, been entrusted with the lives of thousands, lived and worked

around the world, and worked for agencies and departments at the county, city, state, and national level. We met for the first time ten days ago. What we have in common is that we all made the choice to serve others.

We also share a history of trauma, some of us experiencing trauma, some helping others through their trauma. For those of us who have experienced trauma, we also have in common the near-paralyzing inability to ask for help. To say the words "I can't do this by myself anymore." You reach the point of darkness where you feel like anything—anything—would be better than waking up again the next morning. Helpers aren't supposed to need or ask for help. We have that in common.

I suffered my first trauma while deployed to Afghanistan in 2002, when I was sexually assaulted by Allied soldiers. I told no one and did nothing about it. In my mind, I packed it all up in a box, wrapped and sealed it tight with duct tape, and shoved it into a closet in the back. And then I kept going and continued to do my job.

Seven years later, early on in my tour in Iraq, a barrage of rockets landed around my housing unit, destroying a nearby unit, scattering pieces of the occupants and their belongings everywhere. I walked through that to get to work the next day, so I could keep going and continue to do my job.

Jeanne learns she has been paired with Angel. Photo: Scott Jansson



The rocket attacks were continuous and seemingly unending. On New Year's Eve 2010, we endured round after round after round of attacks. By the end of January I had lost ten pounds, could only sleep an hour or two every night, and startled at every noise. My commander finally directed me to get help, so I got a prescription for anti-anxiety medication, kept going, and continued to do my job until I redeployed home in June.

After I returned from Iraq, I bounced from therapist to therapist until 2014, when the Air Force sent me to an Air Force psychologist specializing in trauma. He was the first person I told about my traumatic experience in Afghanistan. He used that information to repeat my sexual assaults in the name of treatment. I told no one and did nothing about it. I packed it all up in a box in my mind, which I wrapped in rolls and rolls and rolls of duct tape to seal it up tight and locked in the closet with the other trauma. I never intended to open that box in my life. I kept going and continued to do my job.

Two years ago, in September 2017, my new therapist told me that my previous psychologist had been arrested and charged with sexually assaulting other airmen in treatment for trauma. I shattered into a million pieces. The guilt I felt, and still feel deeply to this day, for not having come forward in 2014, and preventing him from having access to and assaulting those airmen, was my undoing. I couldn't leave that box sealed up in the closet. I had to come forward to help those airmen, even though I knew it would end my career. Once I opened that closet door, 17 years of trauma exploded out. I couldn't go on, and for the first time I had to say "I can't do my job."

Everyone up here has either reached that point or helped others who have. What we didn't know was that at the same time we were going under, the amazing team that is P.B.B. was building our lifeboats.

That September, when my life imploded and my trauma broke me, halfway across the country Angel was born. And as I struggled to breathe every day, the puppy-raisers in P.B.B. labored every day to train her, care for her, and love her.

As we struggled, they prepared to throw us our lifelines.

As we started to sink, they were teaching our rescuers how to pull us back to shore.

As we wondered how we were going to get through the next 24 hours, they were planning our futures with our new partners.

For nearly 17 years, I woke up most mornings dreading the day ahead. For the past two years—as I prepared to testify, through the trial and the sentencing, despite outpatient treatment, inpatient treatment, and the best efforts of some amazing therapists—most nights I hoped I wouldn't wake up the next day.

I met Angel ten days ago, only three days after the sentencing was final. As the puppy-raisers know, Angel does not simply open her eyes and wake up. She explodes



Top: Jeanne and some pups take a break after a day of team training.  
Bottom: Jeanne and Angel at their graduation ceremony, Commissioner Annucci presiding. Photos: Scott Jansson

awake, wagging her whole body, making happy grunts and noises, and is simply happy to awaken to a new day of possibilities. She is so excited to get going she can barely contain herself.

It's been ten days since I met her, and I now wake up with her, often nose to nose, starting to feel the same way. I know that no matter what happens that day, my Angel will be by my side and watching my back.

That is a gift that I can never repay. No words exist to tell everyone at P.B.B. what they have given to me in the form of Angel.

The puppy-raisers—quite simply, they have given me my life back. And for that I will be eternally grateful.

I have no doubt that I speak for everyone up here when I say that the puppy-raisers have changed the course of our lives in a way we never thought possible. A piece of each of them will always be with us, in our puppies and in our hearts. Thank you.

# PAWS FOR APPLAUSE

## IT'S IN THE STARS

On October 1, Puppies Behind Bars received a letter from Charity Navigator, the independent not-for-profit that has become America's largest and most-used evaluator of charities. Charity Navigator's rating system examines two broad areas of a charity's performance—their financial health and their accountability/transparency—and awards from one to four stars to each of the 9,000-plus organizations they evaluate.

The letter brought excellent news. We can't say it any better than Charity Navigator president and C.E.O. Michael Thatcher, so we'll quote him; "We are proud to announce Puppies Behind Bars has earned our thirteenth consecutive 4-star rating. This is our highest possible rating and indicates that your organization adheres to sector best practices and executes its mission in a financially efficient way. Attaining a 4-star rating verifies that Puppies Behind Bars exceeds industry standards and outperforms most charities in your area of work. Only 1% of the charities we evaluate have received at least 13 consecutive 4-star evaluations, indicating that Puppies Behind Bars outperforms most other charities in America. This exceptional designation from Charity Navigator sets Puppies Behind Bars apart from its peers and demonstrates to the public its trustworthiness."

## PUPS IN THE PRESS

P.B.B.'s August 15 graduation at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (see the cover story for more details) garnered tremendous press attention. Among the outlets that ran features (on-air, online, or both) after the event were *Good Morning America*, AOL, Forbes, the *Today Show*, WNBC, and the N.Y.P.D.'s in-house television network. The clips are all assembled on P.B.B.'s website for easy viewing.



Puppy-raiser Dawn getting a shake from PK. Photo: Scott Jansson

## TIME FOR OUR CLOSE-UP

Moving pictures can sometimes tell a story better than printed words or still images. And because the story of Puppies Behind Bars has continued to evolve in recent years, we realized it was time to produce a new video that could bring our work to life. Shot by Laurie White, it is live on our website: [www.puppiesbehindbars.com](http://www.puppiesbehindbars.com). In five minutes, viewers attend a service dog graduation, meet inmate puppy-raisers, veterans, and first responders, and see some of the wonderful dogs that transform lives through our programs. Take a look!

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

From Atticus to Zeus, whether service dog or E.D.C., young puppy or mature working canine, all P.B.B. pups have one thing in common—a sponsor. Puppy sponsorship is a unique way to gain insight into the process of training a working dog while giving significant support to all of P.B.B.'s programs. For a tax-deductible donation of \$6,000, sponsors can name a puppy entering the program, and receive updates about the pup's progress. For more information about puppy sponsorship, please contact Eric Barsness at [eric@puppiesbehindbars.com](mailto:eric@puppiesbehindbars.com).

## PLEASE ACCEPT MY DONATION FOR:

- Sponsor a puppy—your puppy will join our program in the next 12 months (\$6,000)
- 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: \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- Check enclosed: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

*Please make checks payable to Puppies Behind Bars.*

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### PUPPIES BEHIND BARS

trains prison inmates to raise service dogs for wounded veterans and first responders, as well as explosive-detection canines for law enforcement. Puppies enter prison at the age of 8 weeks and live with their inmate puppy-raisers for approximately 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.