



# LOVE AND Honor

By Jamie Williams

Photos by Bonnie Grower  
Photography

## Specialty Trained, Caring Dogs Serve Those Who Serve

On any given weekday, it's not unusual to see recovering warriors at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE) in Bethesda, Md., engaged in a mission that will transform the lives of their fellow veterans with disabilities. A quick look inside the Warrior Canine Connection (WCC) program office there reveals the heart of the mission, an assortment of young Golden and Labrador Retrievers with bright eyes, eager smiles, and wagging tails.

The Retrievers are part of a unique therapeutic service dog training program for recovering service members in treatment at Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities. The WCC program is specifically designed to mitigate symptoms of combat stress while preparing the dogs to become service dogs for veterans who require mobility and social support.

### The Mission Begins with Special Puppies

Warrior Canine Connection's service dogs in training are purposely bred for health and temperament. Litters are whelped at the WCC Healing Quarters (HQ) in Brookeville, Md., and puppies are sometimes donated to the program by highly-reputable breeders. In all cases, Molly Morelli, WCC's Director of Dog Programs, does exhaustive research into bloodlines.

"At a minimum, we look at 12 generations of each dog's pedigree," Morelli explained. "This makes it possible for us to obtain an accurate picture of each puppy's genetic potential to become a successful service dog, which is the ultimate goal of the program."

Litters are nurtured to be emotionally stable and socially engaged through careful socialization by hundreds of volunteer and Warrior puppy petters. This contact helps the dogs form strong connec-

tions with humans, and provides them with the foundation to become successful service dogs. In some cases, this early socialization takes place during public outings and visits to DOD and VA medical facilities, but for the most part, it occurs at WCC's HQ in Brookeville.

It is there, in the Puppy Enrichment Center, where service members, veterans, military family members and volunteers socialize new litters, and training classes are held on a regular basis. Once puppies reach 8 to 12 weeks of age, they are placed with puppy raisers who take on the demanding and rewarding task of housing, caring, training, and exposing the puppies to experiences and public places that will prepare them for their future lives as service dogs. These puppy parents volunteer to take on this role until the dogs are approximately two years of age and return to the WCC HQ for advanced training and placement with veterans with disabilities.

Most of the WCC dogs in training accompany their raisers to work; in many cases, work is at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and NICoE in Bethesda, at the Warrior Transition Unit at Fort Belvoir, Va., and at the West Coast Program Office at the VA Medical Center in Menlo Park, California. At these facilities, the puppies are part of WCC's therapeutic service dog training programs for service members and veterans in treatment for combat

stress and traumatic brain injury. Each office is staffed by professional Service Dog Training Instructors, who work with the recovering warriors and their family members to teach dog care and training skills, commands, and the tasks that are required of service dogs.

### One Dog, 60 Warriors

It takes approximately two years of training to prepare WCC's dogs to become service dogs. During that period, each dog may help to heal the invisible wounds of approximately 60 recovering Warrior Trainers. WCC service dogs are trained and placed in accordance with the industry standards established by Assistance Dogs International, a coalition of non-profit assistance dog organizations. At the end of training, veterans with disabilities receive WCC service dogs, along with the necessary instruction to care and partner with them, at no cost.

### Addressing Symptoms of Combat Stress

Warrior Canine Connection is the brainchild of founder and executive director Rick Yount, who introduced the concept at the Palo Alto VA Medical System in Northern California in 2008. While working with combat veterans at the VA, Yount, a social worker, found that training service dogs provided warriors with a way to positively address symptoms of combat stress like isolation, emotional numbness and re-experiencing. As he anticipated, the warrior ethos of helping a fellow veteran proved to be a powerful motivator to get veterans with invisible wounds to volunteer to participate in this therapeutic program.

"While our Warrior Trainers are preparing our Golden and Labrador Retrievers to provide mobility and social support to Veterans with disabilities, they are addressing their symptoms of post-traumatic stress and mild traumatic brain injuries," Yount said. "As a result, we see them better reintegrating into their communities post-deployment, and strengthening their family relationships. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved."

Yount explained that in order to effectively train a service dog, the warrior must convince the dog that the world is a safe place. In doing so, service members convince themselves of the same.

In addition, Warrior Trainers are taught to praise and provide treats to their dogs when they experience a startling event, such as hearing a dumpster door slam. Rather than turning inward to focus on their past trauma, the trainers must get outside of their own heads to focus on the dogs and their mission to help another veteran.

Yount noted that the program has also provided a new career path for some of its participants. "We've seen several of our Warrior Trainers become professional service dog trainers, both for fellow Veterans and for civilians with disabilities," he said. "They tell us that their work with the dogs has been life-changing, and they can't imagine doing anything else."

### Building for the Future

The Warrior Canine Connection program has been expanding so rapidly, the organization has outgrown its current location and is in the process of developing a new Healing Quarters approximately 20 miles away, in Germantown, Maryland.

"We have been extremely fortunate to have the support of public officials and government entities in Montgomery County and the State of Maryland," Yount said. "They understand the importance of programs that focus on the health and well-being of Veterans, and they are responding with enthusiasm to what we're doing."

Yount explained that the new property, which is part of Montgomery County's Seneca Creek State Park, was secured by a 25-year lease with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. The property is currently under development, with plans to relocate in the summer of 2015. The new Healing Quarters will enable WCC to further expand its therapeutic training programs, which in turn will enable the organization to assist the growing number of veterans who are requesting service dogs to enhance their mobility and lives. 🐾

If you would like to learn more about or support Warrior Canine Connection, please visit their website: [www.warriorcanineconnection.org](http://www.warriorcanineconnection.org).

