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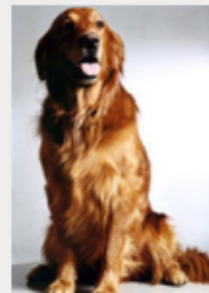


Warrior Canine Connection

If you work at the VA Central Office (VACO), you might have noticed some furry visitors in the lobby every third Friday of the month since last summer. These pups are part of Warrior Canine Connection (WCC), a nonprofit organization that enlists Veterans in a therapeutic mission of learning to train service dogs for their fellow Veterans.

To learn about the origins of WCC, you must first be introduced to Gabe. Nearly two decades ago, Licensed Social Worker Rick Yount received an unexpected Christmas present from two friends who were Veterans of Operation Desert Storm: Gabriel (AKA Gabe), an eight-week-old Golden Retriever puppy.

A year later, Gabe accompanied Mr. Yount to work — the same day he transported an 11-year-old boy from his biological mother into foster care. Mr. Yount found that during this most traumatic of times, Gabe instinctively knew how to soothe the devastated child, and a seed was planted. With Mr. Yount's guidance and training, Gabe became a Certified Therapy Dog.



When he got Gabe, Mr. Yount was working with abused children in a foster home in rural West Virginia. Gabe now has offspring in many countries, who are helping Veterans and their families all over the world.

When US troops began arriving home from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts with serious physical wounds and mental trauma, Mr. Yount saw the opportunity for a symbiotic relationship and became convinced that dogs could play a pivotal role in Veterans' healing. In July 2008, Mr. Yount created the first Warrior dog-training program to provide a safe, effective, non-pharmaceutical intervention to help treat the symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). The program, based at the Palo Alto VA's Men's Trauma Recovery Program in Menlo Park, CA, involved a mixture of active duty and Vietnam War Veterans and evolved into a highly respected intervention using experiential training.

Mr. Yount was asked in 2009 to establish the Warrior dog-training program at Walter Reed Army Medical Center's Warrior Transition Brigade (WTB) in Washington, DC. In October 2010, he and the program were invited to be part of the PTSD and TBI research, treatment and education mission at the new National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE), in Bethesda, MD — located at what is now the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.



Rick Yount outside VACO



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Warrior Canine Connection



In 2011, WCC was founded to expand the availability of this therapeutic service dog-training program to the U.S. Department of Defense and VA medical treatment facilities throughout the country, and to conduct research to establish this model as an evidence-based therapy for PTSD and TBI. WCC utilizes a Mission Based Trauma Recovery model (see infographic below) to help Veteran "Warriors" recovering from the stress of combat reconnect with their families, communities and life.



WCC puppies taking a break from socializing at VA Central Office in Washington, DC

According to Mr. Yount, "The benefits that Veterans with PTSD can get out of participating in training these dogs for fellow Veterans, and how one dog can be trained by multiple Veterans over the two years or so that it takes to train them — this is a mental health intervention that's experiential and teaches skills that are critical to transitioning and adjusting from combat missions to health missions."

By interacting with these dogs as they move from puppyhood to training to adult service dogs, Warrior Trainers benefit from a physiological and psychological animal-human connection. As a result of their efforts, Veterans with disabilities receive the finest in trained service dogs. Through WCC's program at medical centers, Veterans and Service Members have the opportunity to help train a service dog for their fellow Warriors as part of their own healing process. This is "Warrior Ethos" — the mission of helping out a fellow Warrior as part of this process.

A puppy naps on a warm blanket at the edge of the play pen, surrounded by toys. Each dog is purpose-bred specifically for temperament and longevity, which ensures the dog's health and ability to serve Veterans. For example, for a Veteran requiring mobility assistance, WCC ensures they're paired with strong, healthy dogs with healthy hips and joints who can help with physical activity. In addition, WCC breeds and socializes all of their dogs to ensure they're friendly. If you're at VACO, you might be able to see and socialize with these pups during one of their future visits!



How we help Warriors

To date, thousands of Service Members and Veterans experiencing symptoms of combat stress have participated in WCC's program. Since its founding, WCC has paired 57 dogs with Veterans. Any Veteran in the US can qualify for a service dog, which are matched, paired and provided to Veterans at no cost to them.

<http://warriorcanineconnection.org/how-we-help-warriors/infographic/>

As a nonprofit, WCC hopes to help build a public-private partnership with the VA to help more Veterans, wherever they are located. WCC also hopes to see the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act — drafted with the help of Mr. Yount — passed, so this program can be expanded to additional Veterans centers.

Learn more about WCC and apply to be a 'puppy parent' at:
<https://warriorcanineconnection.org/>



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