



SPARTAN PAWS 4 WARRIORS

Story & Photos by Donna Bush

December is upon us and most of us have thoughts of Christmas gifts and spending time with loved ones. A popular Christmas gift for young children has always been a puppy. I got my first puppy as a Christmas present. Dusty, a solid white collie, came to us one chilly Christmas morning.

This December, three military veterans and their families will receive a puppy. Not as a “Christmas” present, but still a present; made possible through Spartan Paws 4 Warriors, a local non-profit.

Torri Tsagournos received his canine handler training when he worked for the Department of Energy (DOE) Strategic Petroleum Reserve in Harahan, Louisiana. Tori completed an 8-week immersive school with Ricky Farley, owner of Alabama Canine. He returned with a comprehensive understanding of explosive search and suspect apprehension, as well as an in-depth understanding of why a dog acts and responds a certain way. While with DOE, Torri started

training other people’s dogs after his veterinarian began referring clients to him. After seven years, he made the move to open Spartan Protection Forces and Canine Services to breed and train dogs.

Although Torri didn’t see active combat while enlisted for four years in the U.S. Marine Corps, he had a great appreciation for what other veterans experienced while deployed. He wanted a way to give back. It all started when one of his military friends reached out from California to request one of Torri’s puppies as a service dog. Back then, Torri thought of service dogs as military or police dogs searching for drugs, explosives and/or suspect apprehension. He had never thought of service dogs as support dogs.

Torri eagerly dug into researching and soon realized he had found a way to pay back service men and women for their sacrifices. He breeds full-bred Belgian Malinois, as well as Malinois

crossed with German Shepherds and Dutch Shepherds, which are perfect as service dogs. Not only are they extremely versatile, bond fast and learn quickly, they are also loyal for life.

Torri explained that many who’ve seen active combat duty have a difficult time talking about their feelings and experiences, particularly with others who haven’t been in similar situations.

HOW TO DONATE TO

SPARTAN PAWS 4 WARRIORS

www.SpartanPFCanine.com

Select the ‘Spartan Paws 4 Warriors’ tab and donate via Venmo or PayPal. Or mail a check to the address:

**105 Churchill Downs Dr.
Bush, LA 70431**



Often, they return with physical injuries, mental and emotional trauma. The battle with depression, anxiety, nightmares and PTSD is very real. These battles can lead to family difficulties. With various emotional and physical injuries, it's natural to worry about being a burden to family. A returning veteran's thoughts can quickly shift to suicide.

How does a dog help? The veteran and dog quickly bond, building a tight-knit relationship, convincing the veteran that they can't leave. There would be no one to care for their dog. Per Torri, a service dog can pull a veteran out of a deep hole of depression. Often, veterans with extreme anxiety are not comfortable being in crowded situations. Then, with COVID quarantine, isolation increases mental and emotional struggles. The dog offers comfort and support, helping veterans feel more at ease with going places and interacting with others. Plus, they like to show off their dogs.

Since forming his non-profit, Torri has raised 8 litters and between Spartan-bred puppies and rescues, donated 10 dogs to veterans in need.

What is involved with training a support dog? The puppies stay with their mother for the first four weeks. At that time, the biggest challenge is keeping their kennels cleaned and sanitized daily. Around 4 weeks, Torri begins to wean them and the training commences. He starts with potty training, teaching them their names and basic commands. He always watches for any signs of food aggression. That must be stopped early. He begins to socialize them with the pack. The puppies must

learn to get along with other dogs. As they get older, the training gets more involved. At Torri's farm, he has miniature donkeys, goats, chickens, cats and lots of dogs. Torri mentioned, "Almost without fail, every breed of dog reacts aggressively towards the donkeys." The service dogs are taught to get along with all these different animals. They are introduced to loud noises – fireworks, gunfire; and must learn to accept these. The dogs can even be trained to track an injured deer, in case they live with a disabled veteran who happens to hunt. They are trained both on-leash and off-leash. They are taught that when their vest is on, they are at work and must obey every command. When their vest is off, they live life as a pet. However, even then, they must be obedient and ignore any distraction.

Socialization with other dogs is not just good for the dog's soul, but also for taking the dog anywhere the family goes, having it fit in and behave. The

dogs are taught that they cannot approach any person or other dog until given permission to do so.

Another part of their training is learning about wheelchairs. Enter Mary Mayo, a former St. Tammany Parish Sheriff Officer, who was injured in an automobile accident while enroute to the funeral of a fellow officer killed in the line of duty. The accident left Mary wheelchair bound. She has her own service dog, Willa, who still needed some training. Torri helps Mary with Willa's additional training and Mary helps Torri to acclimate support dogs to clients in wheelchairs. The dogs must learn to anticipate when and which direction the wheelchair will move; and to avoid being run over. They have to learn how to come up for treats and how to circumvent catheter bags.

Willa came to Mary from B.B. Rayburn Correctional Facility, where the dogs were never socialized together. Part of her training with Torri is getting her used to dog socialization and

COMMON DOG HANDLING COMMANDS

Desired action in **English**, spoken command in *German/Dutch*. (phonetic pronunciation)

| | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Sit / <i>Sitz</i> (ss-itZ) | Out/Let Go / <i>Aus</i> (owss) |
| Sit by side / <i>Fut</i> (foot) | No / <i>Nein</i> (nine) |
| Down / <i>Platz</i> (plah-tz) | Good dog / <i>Brav</i> |
| Stand / <i>Steh</i> (sh-tay) | Leave it / <i>Lass Es</i> |
| Stay / <i>Bleib</i> (blibe) | Find it / <i>Such</i> (sook) |
| Heel / <i>Fuss</i> (foos) | Okay / Command release |
| Come / <i>Hier</i> (heeere) | Easy / Slow down |
| Jump / <i>Hopp</i> (hup) | Crate / Go into crate |
| Fetch / <i>Apport</i> (ah-port) | |



learning that she cannot chase every squirrel she sees! Mary shared a story where Willa was missing for over two hours after leaving a doctor's appointment when she took off after a squirrel. Torri uses e-collars as both warning and correction. A vibration serves as a warning to not take off. Now, Mary only needs to issue a verbal command and Willa heeds.

Approximately two to four weeks before a service dog goes to their new home, Torri takes the dog everywhere he goes – Lowes, Walmart, restaurants, PetSmart, Mandeville Lakefront, parks, etc. He wants the dog prepared for any place and any situation with the new owner. The same training techniques are not used for every dog, as each dog is different. It takes about a year to have a dog fully trained. Throughout the training, the new owner receives videos and updates on the puppy's progress. This allows the new owner and family to hear and learn the commands which are in Dutch and German. The goal is for family members to be able to command the dog, not strangers.

If the new owner is local, Torri involves them and their family with the training at an early stage. If out of state, Torri will travel with the dog when ready and work three to four days with their new family.

Torri waits until puppies are 4-5 weeks old before allowing an owner to choose their dog. By then, it is easier to see how their looks and personalities will be shaped. Per Torri, "Lots of people will choose a dog based on looks without understanding anything about their inherent behavior and their natural instincts. Many get their dogs as puppies and don't train them adequately while small. When the dog grows bigger and stronger, the owner is left wondering what they got themselves into! I use training, socialization, control, and playtime every day. A dog needs to run and chase and bite. I hide treats and toys and let them find them as part of their play. Sure, it's about obedience training for the dog, but it is also about training the owner! The best thing a dog owner can do is to let their dog be a dog. At the end of the day, their instinctive drives are satiated. This reinforces that life is great when they do what they are supposed to do, and life is not so fun when they don't." Much of the training is to help protect the dog from harm. A dog that obeys commands will not run out in front of traffic, risking being hit by a vehicle.

The first veteran service dog in training I met was Ziva Lexie. She will bless two families this December. How can that be? Her veteran, Paul, served in the U.S. Army - 2nd infantry division, with a tour in Korea and 2 tours in Iraq. During his second Iraq tour, he was injured by an IED resulting in the loss of his right leg, a traumatic brain injury, and persistent PTSD. He must rely on a prosthetic leg and a wheelchair for mobilization. This is

where Mary and her wheelchair are instrumental in Ziva Lexie's training. Additionally, Paul deals with extreme anxiety doing the most basic tasks that we all take for granted.

How does Ziva Lexie bless a second family? A while back, a wonderful mother reached out to Torri to express her interest in donating to a Spartan Paws 4 Warrior puppy. She was searching for a way to honor her daughter, Lexie, after she passed from a rare form of brain cancer at the age of 23. The mother shared with Torri, "My daughter Lexie was a warrior in her own battles with anxiety, substance abuse and then cancer. Lexie had an enormous heart and a passion for all animals, especially dogs. Throughout her life she found comfort in the company of her animals, Leo and Binx. My thoughts went to service dogs and my Google search found you and your program. I don't believe in coincidences. Both of Lexie's grandfathers were veterans. My wish is to donate to offset some of the cost associated with the placement of a veteran's puppy. My only request, in addition to a photo of the puppy and new family, would be to name her after Lexie." When Torri shared the story of Lexie with Paul and his family, they immediately agreed to the name of Ziva Lexie!

Next, I met Zion, who will soon make his home with Marine Gunnery Sergeant Cooper and family. Sgt. Cooper writes, "In times of trouble, a man needs a dog. I never thought I would need nor want a service dog. After 17 years of honorable service and retiring early, I thought I had it all – beautiful wife, 2 beautiful children, beautiful house, beautiful cars and people who I thought were my friends. As strong as I was, surviving 5 deployments, the year of COVID-19 pandemic hit me mentally. My mind got me. PTSD beat me. I saw everything I thought was important go away. I started having suicidal thoughts. This was ruining me, my marriage, my relationship with my children and I was hating myself. I self-imploded with substances and partied with people I thought were friends. When the party stopped, I realized they weren't friends. I reflected on what was most important. With therapy and Jesus Christ, I saw the Light. Karma and God for some reason said, 'Maybe a service dog will help me to control my anger.' I reached out to Torri, whom I had served with years ago and was blessed with the gift of Zion."

Kona came out next. She was nervous around Mary's wheelchair and Torri remarked that she would receive a lot more exposure to get her comfortable. Kona will soon make her home with U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Austin Combest in Texas. He was deployed twice to Iraq and three times to Afghanistan. During the third deployment, his team was ambushed, leaving his left forearm shattered and shrapnel down the entire left side of his body. After

a medical discharge, he continued to battle PTSD and depression. He is a firefighter and paramedic in Texas and, along with his wife and 2 young sons, is looking forward to Kona's arrival.

During a training trip to the Mandeville Lakefront, I met Evi and her veteran owner Spencer Jennings, who was a US Army medic, deployed to Kunar Province Afghanistan with a reconnaissance platoon. During this deployment, his platoon was exposed to the worse aspects of war. After this grueling year, he returned home and left the Army to attend college. He refused medical help for years until his wife convinced him to seek care. Sadly, these conventional methods offered little or no relief. At the recommendation of a Veteran Center Counselor, he began to research service dogs and knew it would be a great option for him. His wife reached out to Torri and shared Spencer's story. Spartan Paws 4 Warriors was able to bless Spencer with Evi, who began providing relief her very first day. Spencer shared, "Evi has made such a big difference in my quality of life!" She goes everywhere with him. He works in Sports Medicine at a Baton Rouge high school. She is with him every day at work. I have to say, she is the best-behaved dog I've ever seen, even around a dozen other dogs. Evi was off-leash the majority of my time around her. Spencer only needed to utter the word 'nein,' no in German, and she obeyed. Spencer explained, "I work with my hands. I can't hold a leash all day. Evi is off-leash most of the day."

I observed Evi's behavior as she constantly scanned the Lakefront, watching where Spencer, his wife, Caytlin, and their 2 ½ year old son, Brooks, enjoyed the day. She was alert and never missed a move. Evi even obeyed Brooks! It was easy to see that she's an important part of the family! As an added bonus, Evi and Kona are sisters from the same litter. Spencer and Kona's veterans served

together and have stayed in touch. A visit is already planned to Kona's new home to allow the dog siblings some well-deserved play time together

All the puppies I met were sired by Thor, a solid black Belgian Malinois that was described as a "beast of a dog." Two different guys contacted Torri on the same day about their friend's dog, Thor, who had bitten them both and his owner. They wanted Torri to take Thor or he would be put down, due to his aggressive nature. Torri agreed to give him a look. He was looking for a black full-blooded Belgian Malinois alpha male. Thor fit the bill. Torri kept him in a muzzle for six days, during which Thor repeatedly tried to attack him.

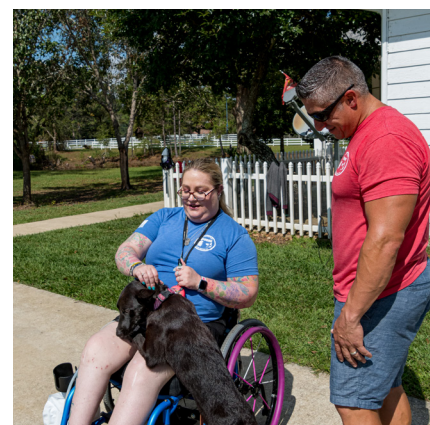
Torri shared, "Lots of things cause this type of aggression. For one, he has a really high drive. He's a working dog. If you don't work him, he's going to do something with that high drive. Also, he's super alpha. His owner had no control of him. He didn't use any kind of correction collar and Thor became alpha over him. All dogs need love and care, but they also need to know who is boss. If you let them think they are the boss, they will be the boss. In Thor's eyes, he felt like he had to protect his owner. Thor saw anyone near his owner as a threat and he would become aggressive."

The first week with Thor was very challenging. The focus of this week was bonding. Torri had to earn Thor's trust and used various methods to do so. He attempted to feed him by hand, pet him, take him for leash walks, etc. Whenever Thor became aggressive, he lost his freedom by being placed back in his kennel. It took one full week of bonding and building trust. After several weeks of training and socialization, Thor became a great addition to The Spartan Pack.

Torri's goal is for the service dog to be acclimated to every possible setting

that it could ever encounter and to successfully navigate these situations and support their owners.

I've shared a few of the success stories of these service dogs helping heal their owners. But there are many, many more. Please donate to help more veterans find their soulmate service dog.



REAL LIFE EXAMPLE OF THE COMFORT OF A SUPPORT DOG

Mary Mayo shared with me and Torri, "A few nights ago, I was worried about being a burden on my mom. She's getting older and I don't want to be a burden. Life is very, very hard in this chair. Even after 14 years, it is still a struggle. I feel guilty asking for help. I used to be so, so independent. Not anymore. I was crying and thinking about how to not be a burden. But, at the same time, 'Who would take care of my baby, my Willa, if anything happened to me?'"

Torri asked, "Did Willa come to you?"

"Yes! She did! She put her front paws on my arm. I was balling. She completely turned my disposition around. I was laughing and crying at the same time. 'I love you so much, dog!' It's like she saved me. She saves me every day!" Mary has had Willa for five years.