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TRAIN A DOG ~ SAVE A WARRIOR (TADSAW)

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“Life was locked in my house all day, afraid to leave, afraid to go to a restaurant or to my kid’s soccer game, or to the grocery. I had to sit with my back to the wall, watch all the doors, never slept without horrible flash-backs, was hyper vigilant and drank too much. Twice I came close to killing myself when my wife stopped.”

All too often, Train a Dog-Save a Warrior (TADSAW) hears these same words from hundreds of other warriors seeking assistance. The above warrior’s life was changed in the October 2011, when he was partnered with a service dog named Gunny. Gunny has made all the difference. This warrior is now able to do all of those things he feared, because his ‘battle buddy’ Gunny is by his side.

Emotional, mental and physical scars from combat can bring a racing heart, panic attacks, mental replays, jumpiness, difficulties concentrating, nightmares where the warriors experience the horrific aspects of the event and have repeated night terrors, often sleeping less than an hour or two a night for years. Emotions are shut off. People places, conversations act as stimuli, closing the warrior off



from the world until all the warrior wants to do is go somewhere and be alone. Coping skills are shattered. The warrior may no longer know how to act or what to expect in order to survive. There is all too often a sense of hopelessness.

No matter what the chaos of the past heaps on them, sometimes the answer just might be found at their feet. Sometimes the only and the best thing, that can answer a cry for help, is a dog. What appears to be an ordinary dog just might have an extraordinary power to create a barrier, change a life, or restore the trust and the dreams of a warrior. This dog will most often break the odds, becoming a warrior's "battle buddy" and the cry for help will be answered. For many of our warriors returning with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injuries or Military Sexual Trauma, a TADSAW Service Dog is there for them.

Imagine leaving the battlefield one day and being at McDonalds the next, with people that have no ability to comprehend where you have been emotionally or physically. You are a completely different person. You are suffering and trying to survive with a traumatic brain injury, post traumatic stress, and /or possible injuries. You struggle day after day on a journey that seems to have no end. Some days wanting it to end so badly you don't want to live any more. People's lives have been disrupted and put on hold to be there for you, spending month after month and sometimes years with you in a hospital.

Perhaps the warrior has come home missing an arm, both legs, blind or with severe burns or a traumatic brain injury. It is then that help is offered by another type of hero, a TADSAW SERVICE DOG, a companion or an assistant that sees past the missing limbs, burns, brain injuries and PTSD. Warrior and dog meet on equal ground. There is no judgment. The warriors are simply loved unconditionally.

When a warrior does something as simple as petting a dog, within minutes they get a massive release of beneficial hormones such as dopamine. The stress hormone, cortisol is decreased. Physical anxiety goes down, which most often results in lessening depression to these young men and women who return home to what appears to be another combat zone. However, in the presence of an experienced dog, the battle of rehabilitation back home provides direction, hope, a sense of peace about the future. These remarkable dogs see warriors through nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks, sleeplessness, hyper-vigilance, mental replays, serious emotional depression, alcohol and drug abuse, and grief. These issues leave warriors unable to work, or to participate in family life. Warriors needing the assistance of a TADSAW service dog often suffer from: guilt, rage, spiritual despair, suicidal thoughts, and vivid nightmares. These dogs become their lifesavers!



Man's best friend, just might be a warrior's best prescription. These dogs are not accessories. They bring hope and comfort to these warriors in crisis. Sometimes that is all that is needed to let go of tears and fears. Empathy cannot be taught. It is just something dogs know. These warriors with PTSD want to live again, but they aren't sure how. Feelings range from abandonment to feeling battered. Sometimes a dog is the tool that leads to repair. Repair of the foundation, the structure, to a place where the warrior finds he can once again live in his own skin.

The TADSAW journey is a story of extraordinary rescue dogs and extraordinary heroes. They are both heroes which are serving or have served our country in their own irreplaceable ways. Our returning warriors have more need for service dogs than ever expected, and certainly more than ever before in history.

Wounded warrior, Kim and her TADSAW Service Dog have a bond, an unmatched, emotional attachment. This dog is her anchor, her lifeline; her saving grace. She no longer has to hide behind the clothes racks in Wal-mart at 2:00 AM in a hyper vigilant state, fearful of snipers. She no longer barricades herself in the closet at night behind duffle bags, while holding a knife. She has her dog. She has found her safe place.

Often our returning warriors with PTSD have lost themselves. Senses like: touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing are missing. Without these senses they are lost. Comfort can be found in the comfort of a dog's head on their laps. If they can feel, it is evidence that they are alive!

Here's how it works!

For warriors with PTSD, it has been documented that dogs helps with emotional regulation. Patients who are very anxious and have anger issues find they can't work with a dog if they yell. They must have a calm voice. Working with a dog helps build confidence and helps bridge the gap with strangers. More often than not, the response and the bond are immediate.

The female warrior, previously mentioned named Kim, now finds that with her **TADSAW SERVICE DOG** she is able to sleep. Simply having a dog around allows these warriors to trust the dog and to assess the safety of their surroundings. These dogs have a much keener sensory capacity than people.

TRAIN A DOG~SAVE A WARRIOR has found that a great majority of the warriors with PTSD choose a shelter dog because they want '*to save something*'. They may choose a dog with an injury because they have an injury too. They are both healing. They fit together. They are a team.



Veterans, often suffering alone, seem to silence themselves because of the stigma still attached to psychological injuries like PTSD. The dog can calm them down and get their minds off of everything going on in their lives by focusing on the dog, not themselves.

There is life after injuries. This new quality of life just might be, in part, based on a PTSD SERVICE DOG. Here's how **TADSAW'S PTSD SERVICE DOGS** can help.

A rescue dog from a shelter or the warrior's own personal dog, if deemed appropriate in temperament, demeanor, and size, will be evaluated and trained on specific commands for the specific needs of a wounded warrior with PTSD/TBI. Once trained, these **TADSAW SERVICE DOGS** have the ability to decrease isolation, the need for medication, anxiety, and panic

attacks. These dogs 'have their backs.'

This extensive and costly training comes at no charge to the warrior or the service dog. Training lasts between 3-4 months at a minimum. Once training is complete, the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizenship classification is awarded to the team. Intensive training is conducted to meet the specific needs of the warrior and the service dog. Once complete, the service dog is eligible for "service dog" designation, according to the American Disabilities Act.

The team carries necessary health certificates and documentation and is able to accompany the warrior to stores, restaurants, and living accommodation. This documentation permits the warrior full access to any place they wish to visit.

From Specialist P. at Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC)

"I am a wounded warrior. I have a chocolate lab that is pretty much my best friend. She helps me in my darker hours. I would love to have her with me all of the time especially when confronted with more serious situations such as large crowds and dealing with the public. Being able to have my four legged best friend by my side through this training is just an amazing thing. She has always been there for me and been able to help me as a comfort dog. After this training she will always be able to be by my side. I will not have to worry so much about will what I am about to do cause a panic attack. I will know I have Cocoa by my side to help me through my everyday tasks I found difficult to do before. I won't always worry and be on guard, because I will have my best friend by my side."

"Yes, they provide companionship. But they also can detect changes in a person's breathing, perspiration or scent to anticipate and ward off an impending panic attack with some well-timed nuzzling. They are trained to let their masters know when it's time to take their medication and

to wake them from terrifying nightmares. Service dogs raise their masters' sense of well-being. There is evidence to suggest that increasing their numbers would reduce the alarming suicide rate among veterans, decrease the number of hospitalizations, and lower the cost of medications and human care." Minneapolis Star Tribune/**U.S. Senator Al Franken.**

A TADSAW SERVICE DOG allows our warriors with these 'invisible wounds' to live with some hope, in a society that sometimes appears to discourage people who have disabilities.

Our warrior's courage is often a gamble with life. However, with a dog by their sides they walk through the shadows, able to affirm life in the midst of their daily demons. The dictionary defines courage as 'facing danger without fear.' To a wounded warrior a dog offers hope. A hope like nothing else can provide. Hope gives these warriors a second chance. It gives them courage to do what they are afraid to do. And suddenly they find they don't have to do it alone.

"He has taught me the meaning of devotion. With him, I know a secret comfort and a private peace. He has brought me understanding where before I was ignorant. His head on my knee can heal my human hurts. His presence by my side is protection against my fears of dark and unknown things. He has promised to wait for me, whenever, wherever, in case I need him. And I expect I will, as I always have. He is my dog." ~Unknown~

TADSAW looks for dogs which are able to untie the invisible threads that knot our wounded warriors. Multi-dimensional dogs, if you will. Not bad qualities for pound puppies! Our warriors want to rescue something and rescuing they are, as their future TADSAW SERVICE DOGS are being saved from kill shelters. These are dogs who ultimately must remain highly obedient, calm, and unfailingly predictable in often chaotic situations. Perhaps, rescuing a shelter dog to rescue a soldier is part of the answer to reintegration. Train a Dog - Save a Warrior!

These service dogs learn to work beside wheelchairs, walkers, and canes. Slowly, they become in tune with their handler. Many of these warriors also have a Traumatic Brain Injury. This more often than not is accompanied by short term memory loss. Trying to remember the commands and implement them in a split second is not always easy. The underlying reality is these warriors want to succeed and learn with this dog by their sides. They know how they feel with this dog close by at all times. They know the difference this dog makes.

Despite the physical pain and mental disruptions, warriors push through fearlessly. A grimace every once in a while accompanied by frustration, turns these men into warriors once again. They will succeed and they will win. Their lives, to some very great degree, depend on it, as they appear to be waiting to wake up from the pain, from the night terrors, from the anxiety. They too are no different than the rest of us. We all need to feel someone cares deeply for us, no matter what. As Erik Hoffer said, "It is loneliness that makes the loudest noise." With a PTSD

Support Service Dog by their sides, the dark places are illuminated. Loneliness disappears. For with this risk there is much more to be gained than lost.

Consistent training helps smooth out the dog's rough edges. The dog becomes aware, sometimes awkwardly, of how to read his warrior's needs and commands. The dogs are able to read their warriors expressions for what is expected or required of them next. This ability does not happen quickly or easily. Definite distractions exist. However, habitual movements alert the dog to what is needed. They are giving passionate attention to the details surrounding them. Sometimes they win. Sometimes they lose, but always they succeed. For each step is a step toward success. Ultimately, both lives are changed.

For these Soldiers, Airmen, Marines and Seamen that have come home from war with Post Traumatic Stress, recovering a sense of possibility is important. They have no payoffs for remaining stuck. Nor do they want them. What they want is to be rid of the demons that appear out of nowhere, at any time. They want a more normal existence. With a TADSAW SERVICE DOG trained just for them, this can and often does become a reality.



About the Author and the Organization:

TADSAW Foundation, Inc. is a Texas 501(C)(3) non-profit corporation. The mission is to provide for the training of a service dog, as designated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines, for any wounded warrior, active duty or veteran, surviving with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder/Syndrome, Military Sexual Trauma, and/or Traumatic Brain Injury, in order to restore and improve the warrior's quality of life with a canine 'battle buddy', at no charge to the warrior.

TADSAW Foundation, Inc. is funded through private donations and available grants. Applications come from all over the country, including Puerto Rico. The program takes approximately 20 weeks to train the team. The cost to sponsor one TADSAW team is approximately \$2,500.00, covering training, veterinary care, food, and equipment.

For more information, please visit the website: www.tadsaw.org to learn more about the organization, journeys of the warriors, and the lives that have been changed.

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After being deployed twice, once to Iraq and once to Afghanistan, I have not been the same person I used to be. There seemed to have been something missing and yet at the same time I gained some unpleasant things like PTSD, depression, loneliness, vigilance, etc.

Since I have had Asia, my service dog, she has given me back my spark. She's my companion. I have her to talk to about anything and she will be there and listen with her tail wagging.

When I feel alone, she's there to lay by me, comfort me and keep me warm. She has made me become more social with other people and it's a good feeling to have someone ask about her. She's special, she's my friend. It doesn't matter how tough of a day I've had, once I get home and see her, her goofiness makes me laugh and makes me forget all about it.

Benjamin B.

In every way that I could think of at this moment of how Kingsley helps me. He is laying next to me as I type these very words to you. How every single day without fail, he wakes up with me...licking my hand and whole body wagging along with that tail of his. He is forever grateful to me, as I am forever grateful to him. He fills my darkest moments with smiles and soft nudges. He has been to the darkest of places and never left my side. Kingsley's love has never faltered or failed even when he knows he has done wrong. He never misses a beat...never misses a moment. Kingsley is the best thing that has happened to me. I have had PTSD for such a long time. I began to accept that this would be my way of life...but Kingsley had a different idea in mind. This ever faithful companion has showed me life again and that nothing has to be done on your own. He is a true friend, who is always there ready to take a walk, or just sit on the couch. Either way...this dog will be happy...happy to have changed my life.

Michael R.

When I returned from Iraq, I was broken and life wasn't the same. The experience forever changed my life, some for the good, and some for the bad. One thing I knew though, I wanted a dog. I found my dog in a Craigslist ad and off to a small Texas town I went to pick her up. I could tell she was a special dog more so than any other dog I had ever owned before. The effects of my time in war were starting to take its toll on me however. While watching TV one evening with this lump of brown fur in my lap, I saw a program on NATGEO about an Iraqi War vet that had a service dog and I wanted part of that. I searched the Internet for a program that would allow me to use my dog as my companion. I found TADSAW and contacted the director. Soon I found myself training side-by-side with this wonderful beast. After several months of training and a whole lot of love, I find myself with a constant companion I can take anywhere and is my source of strength. She helps me face life, has my back, wakes me when the nightmares come, comforts me when I just don't feel right and makes me get off my couch and interact with the world. If I hadn't found TADSAW I would hate to think how my life might have turned out. Not only has this lump of brown fur helped me, she has helped my family. I just can't thank TADSAW enough for letting me get my life back.

Andrew P.