



# Paws of Allegiance

Newsletter of Paws for Purple Hearts

Fall 2018

## Petco, Donor Generosity Funds San Diego Facility

by PPH Southwest Region Team

The grand opening of the Paws for Purple Hearts San Diego facility in April 2018 was a true celebration of the community support that made it possible. Hundreds gathered in the newly renovated building.

Funding from the Petco Foundation transformed the building into a state-of-the-art site that can house and train dozens of service dogs-in-training for Warriors. It also provides space for Canine-Assisted Warrior Therapy™ sessions, Service Dog-and-Warrior matching and orientation training, dog breeding, and pet dog training for local service men and women.



Photo by Kristen LaTorre

**San Diego dogs with gifts from Girls State Camp participants.**

None of this would be possible without the outpouring of support from the community.

See "Donors," page 2

## Pups Chase the Big Apple

Millions of people traverse Times Square daily. If you were one of them between Jan. 1 and July 15 of this year, you could have seen Paws for Purple Hearts in action in the skies above New York City — featured on an animated display right in the heart of Times Square!

The enormous display showed a short video highlighting PPH work to provide assistance dogs and our innovative canine-assisted therapeutic services that help Warriors recover from the wounds of war and military service. The video played 11,000 times in a prominent position right between the iconic NASDAQ & ABC screens in the Heart of Time Square's "Bowtie."



Photo by Paws for Purple Hearts

**Times Square display promotes PPH canine therapy.**

# Menlo Park Celebrates 10 Years!

By Ellen Fisher and Sandra Brooner

Since its inception in 2008, the Menlo Park VA Trauma Recovery Program (TRP) has helped hundreds of men learn healthier ways to deal with their Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Our participants share their experience:

Our service dogs help Veterans return to civilian life. They practice and train in a variety of public places. Veteran and therapy participant Sandro explains the impact: *“While struggling with hypervigilance, I was more at ease... it allowed me to see things in a different perspective... (and) trust more as my dog companion showed me through his eyes that not everything is a threat.”*



Photo by Sandra Brooner

Alex, who worked with Alyene, a service-dog-in-training, said it *“made me more self-aware. It made me aware of self judgment, negative self-talk — and how to turn it into positive self-talk.”*

John, a Veteran in the Canine-Assisted Warrior Therapy™ program, said, *“The Paws for Purple Hearts program helped me calm down and gave me a renewed sense of purpose with the realization that I was giving back, helping other Vets but not expecting anything in return. It helped me with anger, self-esteem and survival guilt.”*



Photo by Sandra Brooner

## Donors, from page 1

Special thanks go to the Petco Foundation's president and chairman of the board, Charlie Piscitello, and Suzanne Kogut, the executive director. We are grateful for the foundation's \$50,000 grant and were excited to welcome Mr. Piscitello to our grand opening celebration!

Other local organizations provided invaluable support. The American Legion Riders from Santee made a generous donation. The members of the chapter were ecstatic to meet service dog-in-training Valiant. And each participant in the ALA Girls State Camp at Claremont McKenna College made a non-monetary donation of a toy or treat for our dogs. The focus of the camp was on helping Veterans. Our service dogs in training were thrilled to receive these gifts.

The San Diego Paws for Purple Hearts team appreciates the generosity of community members and organizations, which truly helps to make our mission achievable!



Photo by Kristen LaTorre

## PPH instructor and dog Valiant with American Legion Riders.

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Paws for Purple Hearts is licensed by The Military Order of the Purple Heart and the Military Order of the Purple Heart Service Foundation, chartered by an Act of Congress for combat-wounded Veterans



## Alaska PPH Is Growing

By **Betsey Jacobs**

The PPH Northwest Region team has diligently expanded programs in Alaska to serve more Warriors:

- Strengthened existing programs in Fairbanks, including work with incarcerated and homeless Veterans.
- Provided Canine-Assisted Warrior Therapy™ to 91 Warriors in Fairbanks, compared with 60 in 2017.
- Added new Social Therapy sites.



Photo by Betsey Jacobs

**Troy Rivers and Russell, a service dog-in-training.**

- Added puppies-in-training Juneau, Maggie, and Doyle, for a total of six dogs in training.
- Planned to double our facility, adding a whelping room, veterinary treatment office, conference room, a kennel room, and a puppy training area.

None of this would be possible without the faithful support of our donors and volunteers! PPH participant and Puppy Parent Troy Rivers said, “PPH has helped me understand that the more good feelings I allow into my life from wagging tails and furry friends, the less room I have for old memories that do me no good.” He credits PPH with enabling him to significantly reduce his medication.

## PPH Changes Lives in Virginia

By **Christina Cherry**

Our work at the PPH Virginia site is truly rewarding. One participant in our Canine-Assisted Warrior Therapy™ program, Rosalinda, graciously shared her story:

“I can’t believe how much my life has changed since I entered the Paws for Purple Hearts program... I suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Military Sexual Trauma, and numerous injuries and illnesses.

In 2014 I retired from the Army after 21 years of service... I felt lost and broken... I kept a smile on my face but behind it was so much pain. I didn’t talk to anyone because I felt like they were passing judgment on what I was going through. Some people have no understanding of how hard the lives of our military Service Members can be.

In August 2017, my life truly turned around. I met someone! His name was Ozzy, a PPH service dog-in-training. We had this instant connection. Training him gave me peace and a sense of purpose. Watching him grow and make a difference in my life has been a real blessing. Letting him go was one of the hardest things I ever had to do, but I knew he was going to make a difference in another Warrior’s life, just as he had for me.”



Photo by Christina Cherry

## Austin, Texas, Embraces PPH



Photo by Lindsey Velasco

**From left to right: Luis and PPH Libby; McKenna; Erica and PPH Rusty; Dana and PPH Lucy; Deborah and PPH Noah.**

By **Lindsey Velasco**

Warriors at the Austin VA Outpatient Clinic who participate in Canine-Assisted Warrior Therapy™ share their experience:

“It’s the highlight of my Thursday... I understand how they make me feel better, and so I can understand how they will help someone else feel better in the future, as a service dog.”

— Erica

“The program has been very fulfilling not only in my personal life with my own dogs to know that I’m giving back to a fellow Veteran.”

— Deborah



## Paws for Purple Hearts

10201 Old Redwood Hwy  
Penngrove, CA 94951  
(707) 238-5110  
[www.PawsforPurpleHearts.org](http://www.PawsforPurpleHearts.org)  
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## PPH Welcomes Matt Decker as New Clinical Director

Paws for Purple Hearts welcomes Phoenix native Matt Decker as its new clinical director! Matt showed his loyalty and sense of duty early in life, joining the USMC Reserves as a heavy equipment mechanic when he completed high school.



Photo by Sherri Rieck

During undergraduate studies, Matt was deployed to support Operation Iraqi Freedom. In Iraq, Matt, now a Corporal, became the layettes NCO and platoon counselor. He helped service members deal with family matters, addictions, breakups, divorces and even suicidal ideation. Corporal Decker had found his calling. After his deployment, Matt finished his bachelor's degree, earned a master's in social work with a concentration in mental health and military and

veterans services from the University of Southern California, and worked in the helping professions and in canine-assisted therapy. He joined the VA with his therapy dog, Maggie; in time, he received a PPH dog, Larson.

During Matt's service at the Concord Veterans Center, he and Larson deployed to the Valley Fire, the Oroville Dam crisis, and other disasters and crises. He also obtained his LCSW credential — and met Dr. Bonnie Bergin, who offered Matt the opportunity to expand his practice of canine assisted therapy to a national scene: Paws for Purple Hearts.

Since joining PPH in March, Matt has built programs and curricula to benefit veterans. He also provides guidance to each PPH site on programming and community involvement. Matt works to keep his costs down, but we want to have Matt available to respond to our clients in person if needed, and to do that we need your support. Please consider donating to expand our services to those who have given so much to our great nation.