



Dogs are heroes to heroes

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HOW TO HELP Vets Helping Heroes

You can donate to Irwin Stovroff's organization by mail on online.

Send donations to:

Vets Helping Heroes
ATTN: Irwin Stovroff
7374 Woodmont Court
Boca Raton, FL, 33434

or:

Vets Helping Heroes
PO Box 540723
Greenacres, FL 33454

Vets Helping Heroes is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) tax-exempt corporation and donations are tax-deductible.

For more information visit www.vetshelpingheroes.org

By [Kristine Gill](#)

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YOUNGSTOWN

Mark Gwathmey used to wake at 3 a.m. and stand over his wife, telling her to keep quiet. There were bombs going off and people outside the house.

Sometimes he'd walk the halls of his home with a gun looking for signs of the enemy.

But Mark wasn't in Iraq anymore.

He was safe at home in Upper Marlboro, Md. And he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after three tours of duty as a master sergeant for the Marine Corps in the war on terror.

"I was almost to the breaking point of suicide," Gwathmey said. "I thought I was crazy."

It took two years before doctors determined that Gwathmey, 40, was suffering from a traumatic brain injury. Years of exposure to bombings and mortars had left him suffering from daily seizures and difficulty speaking, in addition to PTSD.

"As much love as I could give my husband, it wasn't enough," said his wife, CeCe. "He still felt so alone."

Gwathmey experienced stress fractures in his feet and ankles while overseas, but didn't stop to seek treatment until returning home from the war. He now

suffers from reflex sympathetic dystrophy that sends constant shooting pains through the nerves in his foot. His wife had to dissuade him from amputation, having been told that the surgery does little to relieve the pain. Gwathmey now walks with a cane.

CeCe Gwathmey had read about trained dogs that could learn to detect impending seizures in humans. She looked into buying one, but trained service dogs cost \$35,000 to \$70,000, and many organizations had waiting lists of up to five years.

"I thought, we can't afford that," she said. "And we can't afford to wait that long."

That's when he saw a flier for Vets Helping Heroes, an organization based in Boca Raton, Fla., and run by World War II veteran Irwin Stovroff. The nonprofit program could provide Gwathmey with the service dog he needed — at no cost.

Stovroff, 88, grew up in Buffalo, N.Y., but raised his family in Youngstown, working for Thomasville furniture. He survived as a prisoner of war, but realized not all vets were so lucky.

"I decided I wanted to help those who weren't as fortunate," he said.

He began Vets Helping Heroes in 2006, when he found out that the government does not have funds set aside for providing service dogs to disabled veterans.

Carl Henderson, regional director in the office of public affairs for the Department of Veterans Affairs, said that though the government will cover veterinary care for a veteran's service dog, there is no money set aside for training of the dogs.

"The organizations to which [Veterans Affairs] refers veterans needing guide or service dogs are not affiliated or funded by VA," Henderson wrote.

Stovroff's program is affiliated with a dog-training facility in Smithstown, N.Y., called America's Vet Dogs. Stovroff helps raise \$50,000 per veteran which goes toward the training of a service dog, its food and veterinary care. After about seven to 10 years of service, a dog is retired and Vets Helping Heroes will fund the training of the veteran's next dog.

In its first four years, Vets Helping Heroes has provided more than 35 veterans with service dogs. America's Vet Dogs has placed more than 150 dogs, including the ones Stovroff's organization helped pay for. There are now 220 people on America's Vet Dogs waiting list.

The organization gained national recognition with help from Stovroff's partner, Doris Tamarkin. Tamarkin's nephew who works as a producer, was able to land Stovroff an on-air interview with Fox News. The donations flooded in after that.

Stovroff and the organization's mascot dog, Cash, have since appeared on the "Bonnie Hunt" show, and their interview with "Inside Edition" will air in October.

Stovroff said he has received donations from people in all 50 states, and no donation is too small.

"This program for our young vets coming back depends on private donations," Stovroff said.

After four months of visits with doctors and training staff, Gwathmey was deemed a suitable candidate for a service dog and paired with Larry, an English lab and golden retriever mix who will turn five Dec. 1.

"Larry has brought me out of that low slump," he said. "I can stand with my back to people and know Larry will be watching."

Larry can predict when Gwathmey will have a seizure. He whines to tell him a minor seizure is coming and barks when it's a major one. Those cues tell Gwathmey to stop what he's doing and find a safe place to rest until the episode passes.

Larry also provides physical support when he wears his harness, which helps Gwathmey walk without his cane. Larry can retrieve dropped items and has helped Gwathmey cope with the stress and uneasiness associated with PTSD.

"Everyone who sees Larry says, 'Aw, the military gave that to you,'" CeCe Gwathmey said. "But the military had nothing to do with it. This was entirely through a private charity organization."

She said they are forever indebted to Stovroff.

"This gave Mark his life back," she said.