

IRWIN STOVROFF FOUNDER, VETS HELPING HEROES

More than six decades after surviving a year in a German prison camp during World War II, Irwin Stovroff continues to pay it forward. The former Army Air Forces lieutenant, now 88, devotes at least 30 hours every week to Vets Helping Heroes (vetshelpingheroes.com), the nonprofit he established in December 2006 that raises funds for qualified training facilities to provide assistance dogs for disabled veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

These specialty dogs—trained to carry and retrieve items, open doors and even sense a seizure before it happens—give veterans with visual, physical and emotional disabilities “mobility, independence and companionship.” When Stovroff learned that there was no government funding for assistance dogs, he took action.

In just four years, Stovroff has raised approximately \$2.2 million from all over the country, helping about 50 veterans (a \$50,000 investment by Vets Helping Heroes can cover a lifetime’s worth of service dogs for one disabled veteran).

Stovroff, who also volunteers time as a national service officer for ex-prisoners of war at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center—and who has been honored with the Distinguished Flying Cross and Purple Heart—discusses his charity and his lifelong connection to the military.

[] With a capital “L,” I’m a lucky man. I was Jewish, and the [Germans] were gonna march me down the road to a concentration camp. [Note: Stovroff was shot down during a bomber mission, his 35th, in March 1944.] It was all set to go. And the Russians liberated me. I came home, weighing 90 pounds, with my eyes, my legs, my arms, my brains—and I was able to go to college, have a family and make a living.

[] [In previous wars,] you had to get so many points, and they’d bring you back home and you were done. This time, it’s a volunteer army, so they can send soldiers back and forth as many times as they want. And this is what is causing the post-traumatic stress disorder and the brain damage. There’s no end to it for them.



Irwin Stovroff with his golden retriever, Cash

[] Mark is a disabled vet who has seizures. One day, I’m sitting there with him and his assistance dog starts to bark. Mark [was going to] have a seizure. That barking tells him to sit down or lay down immediately. The dog stands next to him and waits until he senses Mark is OK. Then he licks his face, wakes him up, and the seizure is over. Mark was suicidal until he got his dog.

[] There are maybe about 6,000 amputees,

and we’re talking thousands and thousands of guys with traumatic brain injury [TBI] and post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]. The biggest percentage of the dogs in the future will be for TBI and PTSD.

[] Freedom is not free. For all of us who are enjoying the freedom that we have in this country today, somebody paid a price—and it becomes your obligation to help them for their future and their lives.