

Extra Ordinary Hero

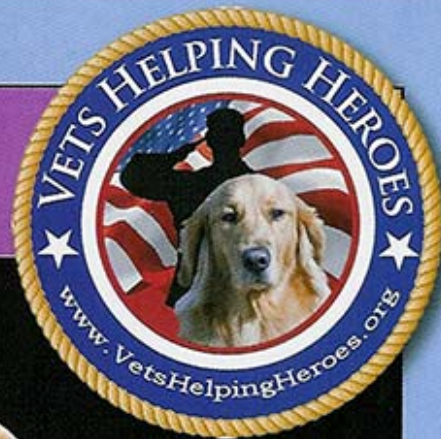


Photo by Eileen Friedenreich at EF Photography

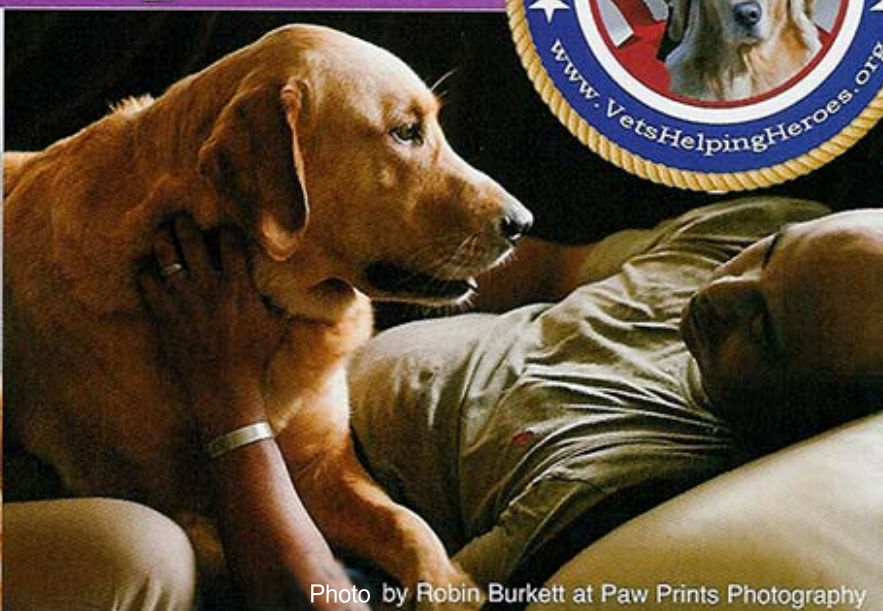


Photo by Robin Burkett at Paw Prints Photography

Irwin Stovroff's passion is completely other-centered. He wants you to pay no mind to the awards, medals and photos from his service flying 35 bomber missions in World War II. He doesn't call attention to the fact that he was a Prisoner of War. The focus for this 88 year-old veteran is a cause that he has dedicated the last three years of his life to; Vets Helping Heroes, a 501(c)(3) organization he founded whose efforts give service dogs to military men and women that have been injured and need assistance.

After three tours in Iraq with the Marines, Master Sergeant Mark Gwathmey returned with Traumatic Brain Injury, Post Traumatic Stress, non-epileptic Seizure disorder and reflex sympathetic disorder. He says, "I was almost to the breaking point of suicide. I thought I was crazy. I couldn't go out in public or be around crowds. The slightest noise or wrong move would send me into panic attacks or cause flash-backs."

While Mark was trying to deal with everyday life as a civilian, Irwin was busy raising funds for assistance dogs for men and women like him, something the government has no budget for. "I was one of the lucky ones," Irwin says. "When I saw that these kids were coming home and being left with virtually no help after their physical injuries were bandaged, I knew something had to be done." In the time since Irwin started the organization, he has been responsible for raising more than \$2 million in funds for providing service dogs to disabled veterans. "We've got 250 veterans waiting for service dogs. At \$50,000 per placement, we've got a long way to go." Irwin explains that each dog is considered a "Gift for Life." Most dogs are retired within 10 years, yet Vets Helping Heroes promises each recipient that they will have a dog for the rest of their life. "In some cases," says Irwin, "that could be five dogs or more in a lifetime!"

For Mark, 40, his gift came after Irwin led the charge to get him the companion he needed. More than two years after his return from Iraq, Mark was paired with a lab/golden retriever mix named Larry. "Larry gave me a sense of security. For the first time in years, I was able to sleep without the fear and paranoia that haunted me for so long. I no longer felt alone and vulnerable," Mark says with relief. Now, three years after their partnership began, life has changed for the better. "Larry senses a seizure before I have one, which allows me to get somewhere safe before it happens. He alerts by barking so my family or coworkers will know what is happening and can provide assistance. He also helps me with stability when I have difficulty walking. Larry is a jack-of-all-trades; it seems like there is nothing he can't help me do."

It's stories like these that keep Irwin doing what he does best...stump for VetsHelpingHeroes.com. He and his dog, Cash, a golden retriever, are the faces of this 501(c)(3), and are intent to bring awareness to the need for our disabled veterans to receive the gift of assistance and companionship that each dog brings.

Perhaps Mark says it better than anyone. "Irwin is an amazing man and such an inspiration! I will forever be indebted to him for all that he and his charity do in supporting America's VetDogs. Without him and people who give so generously of their time and money, I wouldn't have Larry. Irwin is a shining example of vets helping vets."

To make a donation and find out more, see www.VetsHelpingHeroes.org

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Extra Ordinary Hero,
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