

CONNECTION

Trained in Prison, Healing in N. Virginia

Veteran Sabrina Rigney of Lorton with NOEL. Healing power of dogs creates ties between prisoners, veterans and children with disabilities.

PHOTO BY JOAN BRADY

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Nicholas Harrelson, formerly of Centreville and McLean, suffered a traumatic brain injury from an IED in Iraq.



Veteran John Flanagan, with MAGNOLIA, who will be his psychiatric assistance dog.



Sabrina Rigney of Lorton, ex-Air Force with NOEL, who will help her with her PTSD.



Trish, at podium, tells her emotional story for the first time; sharing the past is part of the healing process in the paws4prisons program.



Paws4potential

Disconnected Youth: young people between 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor employed

"Disconnected Youth" is a population identified by the June 2012 Youth Leadership Institute's report to the White House. The group is comprised of young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school or employed.

More likely to end up living on the streets, becoming parents before they are ready and/or in our jails and prisons, these young people cost society \$4.7 trillion, according to the Economic Value of Disconnected Youth researchers.

We simply cannot afford to continue to ignore this growing portion of our population. Paws4people.org, an organization with a successful track record for creating successful rehabilitation and redemption programs for federal and state criminals, believes they can change the statistics. And I believe them.

The new program, paws4potential will combine housing, employment and a supportive environment that includes the healing power of dogs.

Paws4people.org is currently seeking funding for this exciting program.

To learn more about paws4people and the new program, paws4potential, visit paws4people.org and click on the program: paws4potential, or contact me directly at joan@joanbradyphotography.com or 202-256-1311.

— Joan Brady



Trained in Prison, Healing in N. Virginia

Healing power of dogs creates ties between prisoners, veterans, children with disabilities.

BY JOAN BRADY

Rebecca, a pretty blonde in her mid-40s, is holding Ziva, the puppy she is currently training. We might have been two strangers at a local dog park, caught up in a conversation that could have gone on for hours.

But we weren't at a dog park. We were sitting inside Lakin, an all-women correctional facility in West Virginia. And Rebecca, an assistance dog trainer for paws4people.org's in-prison training program, paws4prisons, is serving a sentence of life without parole for a murder committed 21 years ago.

And that comfortable scene on April 4, 2014 was a far cry from how I felt on my first prison shoot, over four years ago.

When I first started going inside prisons for paws4people.org, my job was three-fold: to capture, through photography, the connection between the dogs and their inmate trainers, to provide images that reflected the accomplishments of months of training and to document the moment that veterans, children and young adults were matched with their assistance dogs.

On my first visit, I was scared. No open-toed shoes. No open-heeled shoes. No jewelry. No underwear bra. No khaki clothing. Cell phone and drivers license were left

behind and I shuddered a little as the first set of metal doors clanked behind me. Shivering with cold, I walked through the next set of gates into the West Virginia winter, casting furtive glances at the barbed wire fences that surround the prison.

Almost five years later, khaki uniforms,

barred windows, loudspeaker announcements and door buzzers all melt away as Rebecca and I chat comfortably about her past, her present and her future behind bars.

For Rebecca, it's personal. The paws4prisons program staff and volunteers "give you the tools from a caring position

to show you how to work through ... the mistakes you make in life. In order to be a better person." Rebecca adds that, for her, it's been "life-changing."

One of the tools is mutual sharing. Stories of isolation, drugs and alcohol, abuse, fear and loneliness are the rivers that have carried each speaker to this day.

Hyper-vigilant veterans wrestling symptoms of PTSD anxiously wait to share their stories with inmate trainers, prison officials and paws4people staff and volunteers. Only after that do they get a turn to meet the dogs one at a time in a ritual called a "bump" where paws4people staff determine if there is a match. Before and after each person shares, soft, cuddly puppies are passed around to help calm nerves.

For the trainers, it's more complicated. In addition to sharing their stories publicly, their skills as trainers will be on display. They are as anxious as parents that their dogs do well during demonstrations and the matching process. They will be proud if their dog is matched, but they know that a match today will bring them one step closer to losing their canine companion.

The room set-up is reminiscent of an old-fashioned wedding, with an inmate-trainer side and a free-civilians side. Thirty dogs, mostly golden retrievers, rest quietly on both sides of the aisle.

SNIFFLING CAN BE HEARD quietly echoing off the cement walls as Melissa, an inmate trainer, stands at the podium to share her story. She tells of a happy childhood ending when an uncle took her to a secluded woods and raped her so violently that she had to have a full hysterectomy, at

age eight. No charges were filed.

Years later, grief stricken by the loss of her grandfather, Melissa started taking drugs to numb the pain of her loneliness and she began breaking into houses to pay for the drugs. She had several stints in rehab, but none took. Looking back, "[I] just wasn't ready. [paws4prisons] has been the best rehab... Sometimes I wonder if [the paws4prisons staff] know how big an effect this has on us."

That's a refrain I've often heard from veterans, trainers, parents of children and volunteers. For many of the inmate trainers, the caring from the paws4people team is remarkable.

"To have people that don't even really know you ... care, even though you are in prison and you have made all of those mistakes. [It's] an amazing feeling," explains Tiffany.

Dogs can make a difference that people can't. Air Force veteran Sabrina Rigney of Lorton, looks forward to having a companion who will be persistent about getting her

out of bed in the morning. "I can't get mad at her for pulling the covers off me, because I've really got to get up and feed her and take her out."

When paws4prisons inmate trainers are released from prison, they have marketable skills. They are highly effective dog trainers. In fact, four former inmate trainers are now paid employees with the organization and two more volunteer.

On this day, David Burry, managing director of the paws4people for-profit training arm, Paws Training Centers, is on hand to encourage and inspire trainers. "As a result of my greed and pride, I lost everything," he tells the group. "I pled guilty to bank fraud, wire fraud and money laundering and I was sentenced to 151 months in prison. I now owe the government \$41 million dollars in restitution and the IRS \$12 million. I know that all sounds pretty grim, but in fact I've never been happier."

Since serving his sentence, Burry, formerly an inmate trainer, has teamed up with his daughter, Ashley O'Hara, to train privately

owned dogs as assistance dogs for qualified owners as well as to provide basic obedience and behavior modification for pet dogs in West Chester, PA. "It's amazing to know that I'm making difference and helping others."

Last year, Paws Training Centers were opened at locations across the country. These for-profit training centers provide employment for ex-inmate trainers and others and help to fund the work of the non-profit. One paws trainer is in Leesburg.

Trish, from the inmate side of the aisle, steps up to the podium and reveals a lifetime punctuated by abuse, rape and trauma perpetrated by family and foster care. It's impossible not to want to reach out and give Trish a hug as she tells her story. But there is no touching at Lakin. A fellow trainer stands with her, but cannot comfort her. She appears relieved to return to her seat where she is surrounded by her four-legged support system.

Carol Hancock is the Veteran Client Advocate for paws4people's "paws4vets" pro-



Tiffany, an inmate at Lakin Correctional serving a 15-year-to-life sentence, is training TANNEN.



Rebecca, an inmate at Lakin Correctional serving a sentence of life without parole, is training ZIVA.



FINLEY, third dog from left, is the mother of eight puppies who arrived at Lakin Correctional at the age of four months to begin training.

'You Are Not Your Mistakes'

BY JOAN BRADY

"She was one of the most disagreeable people I had ever met," says paws4people Chairman and COO, Terry Henry, remembering his reaction to meeting Rebecca at Lakin Correctional Center, more than three years ago.

Seeing her now with her earnest smile and a well-behaved puppy happily nestled in her lap, it's hard to imagine the Rebecca he describes.

The old Rebecca had a nickname she chooses not to explain, because it reflects a part of the past that she doesn't want to talk about. And it was the old Rebecca who committed murder during a roadside altercation. That same bad attitude she had in her early 20s got her kicked out of the "paws4prisons" assistant dog training program in her 40s, three years ago.

Rebecca's childhood is devoid of memories of birthday parties, school concerts and family trips. The second of four children, what Rebecca recalls is abuse, as far back as she can remember, the only one of her siblings, she says, to suffer at the hand of her mother.

It's hard not to feel the pain with her as she recalls how she felt when she was fired from the paws4prisons program. "[I was] embarrassed, ashamed and hurt." And then she adds, "It was life changing though and now



Harper, a labradoodle trained at Lakin Correctional, with Julia, 14. "Wherever Julia needs extra supervision, companionship, responsibility or a bridge to human connection, Harper is there," says Julia's mother.

I'm thankful for it."

After 19 years in prison, she had a goal. She was determined to get back into the assistance dog training program. Rebecca is serving a life sentence, without the possibility of parole. She wanted her time to mean something. After a year of continu-

ous re-application, Rebecca was conditionally reinstated.

She describes how it felt to come back, now two years ago. "I was still embarrassed. ... I felt like I was still being judged." But then she realized, not only was she not being judged, but "they were trying to help

HEALING POWER



paws4people

PHOTOS BY JOAN BRADY

me to understand myself. ... They wanted to show me how to change."

This support was new for Rebecca, "It was the first time I felt like someone cared about me. It's not easy to feel deserving, when no one had ever cared before."

Learning to accept caring support was just one of her challenges. Cece Miller, Director of the paws4prisons program, really pushed her to grow; trainers have to pass a rigorous academic curriculum that includes tests and essays. They must become proficient public speakers. And they must be able to take direction and correction and work with others.

Two years after that reinstatement, Rebecca has earned her role as a leader in the program says Cece Miller, Director, paws4prisons. "I am very proud of her and I have loved watching her grow."

Rebecca relishes the opportunity to help others. "They have a story. They have prob-

SEE REBECCA

Dogs' Unconditional Love

CONTINUE

Lakin hoping to be matched with a psychiatric assistance dog. As a medic, she did one tour in Kuwait and then another in Baghdad. She described tending to a 19-year-old soldier as he begged her not to let him die. "You pretty much know that when they say that, they're gone. I'll never forget that," she tells her audience.

After her third tour, back in Northern Virginia, Sabrina was scheduled to be a living kidney donor for a close friend, when her orders to redeploy for the fourth time came in. She declined redeployment in order to move forward with the kidney donation and was later denied the opportunity to re-enlist, after eight years of service.

Her pain is palpable as she describes what it felt like to lose her military family.

Sabrina suffers from PTSD. While she is employed as a paramedic, she often finds it difficult to be around people. Some days she can't bring herself to leave her home. There are 22 suicides of veterans every day, she tells her audience. And three times, she was almost one of them.

When she began working with a therapist who included a therapy dog in their sessions, tiny pieces began to heal. Today she hopes that she will be matched with an assistance dog who will help her to get her life back.

Those listening to Sabrina on both sides of the aisle nod in sympathy and wipe away tears.

Two other veterans with PTSD tell their stories. All have military friends who have committed suicide. One says he lost more of his fellow soldiers to suicide after deployment than during combat.

By the end of the day, each veteran has been joyfully matched with a dog and train-

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If you would like to learn more about paws4people and its programs visit paws4people.org or contact Joan Brady at joan@joanbradyphotography.com or call 202-256-1311.

ers stand by proudly while pictures are taken. Later, there is time to socialize.

"It was really great to meet someone that has had a chance to get to know and love NOEL," says Sabrina of Tiffany, one of the trainers of the golden retriever Sabrina has been matched with today.

Many of the trainers have had little encouragement in their lives. And it's isolating to be in jail where inmates share stories of being abandoned by friends and family. But today, they bask in the applause for the difference they are making.

This is a three-legged stool of inmate trainers, dogs and clients – with the paws4people organization creating the right environment for each group to thrive as they travel their personal journeys of redemption and healing accompanied by the caring support of others and the unconditional love of dogs.

As trainers file out and the civilians behind them, there is a connection between those who sat on either side of the aisle that will remain forever unbroken.

ably still be closed up. And now... she is so outgoing, happy and confident. [she has] self respect and self esteem... [it] touches your heart."

And Rebecca herself has touched the heart of Terry Henry.

"I have never witnessed a more dramatic change in a person than the change I have witnessed in Rebecca. ... The world is now a much better place and Rebecca has only begun to have an effect."

With the caring motivation of paws4people, Rebecca has learned a critical lesson: "You are not your mistakes."

Rebecca

CONTINUE

lems. [I can] help to teach them to be better people."

For her, it's not as much about the dogs she trains, although that's very important. What touches her the most is "watching the other girls' faces... watching them grow and heal [because of the dogs they have trained.]"

Julia, 14, is on hand to show the trainers how well she is doing with Harper, a Labradoodle who was trained at Lakin. Julia has a genetic disorder which causes abnormal blood vessel malformations to grow in her brain. She has been through four surgeries to date, to stop brain hemorrhages.

"Harper fills the holes in Julia's life," Julia's mother says. "Wherever Julia needs extra supervision, companionship, responsibility or a bridge to human connection, Harper is there."

Julia would not speak to the audience, but happily took center stage to show off her assistance dog, Harper.

Rebecca, who met Julia before she was matched with Harper, describes how she felt when Julia began demonstrating. "At that moment, you are thinking, well just think if she didn't have that dog, she would prob-



PHOTOS BY JOAN BRADY

lost (adj): 1. unable to find the way.
2. not appreciated or understood.
3. no longer owned or known



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Sharing Burden of PTSD

BY JOAN BRADY

Paws4people assistance dogs sprinkle the country, matched with children and veterans whose lives have been forever changed. More than ten of those dogs have benefited from Tiffany's loving training at Lakin Correctional Center in West Virginia.

While paws4people breeds dogs with specific qualities to help ensure more successful assistance dogs, the organization also rescues dogs domestically and even some from Afghanistan.

Tiffany says her biggest challenges have come working with dogs who have been traumatized. It's difficult, when they can't talk to you about what happened, "to re-program a scared dog to letting him know that the world is ok and people are ok."

The work that Tiffany does is as healing for her as it is for the dogs she trains and the clients who are matched with her dogs.

She describes a challenging childhood in which her parents split up when she was five. When her mother remarried and started a second family, Tiffany moved in with her beloved grandmother and was raised jointly by her grandmother and her father.

Her voice cracks a little when she talks about feelings of isolation and not fitting in at school. By 13, she was acting out and turning to drugs and alcohol that she felt allowed her to fit in somewhere.

At 14, her grandmother and father agreed that a change of scenery might help. What followed was a wrenching move to South

Carolina to live with her dad. But Tiffany didn't find it any easier to fit in in South Carolina, especially, she remembers with a wry smile, with her blue hair. From that point, she was passed back and forth between grandmother's home and father's home whenever she got into trouble.

"I felt like nobody really cared what happened to me... I just acted crazy and acted out and rebelled... I made bad choices and mistakes and ended up here."

Tiffany's life stopped when her fiancé died of a drug overdose. Suffering from PTSD herself, it's important to Tiffany that she is able to help the paws4people veteran clients with their PTSD by training dogs that will allow them to resume normal activities like going into a grocery store and getting gas.

Sabrina Rigney, ex-Air Force, was thankful to meet Tiffany and to learn more about NOEL, who will become her assistance dog.

"It was really great to meet someone who has had a chance to get to know and love NOEL. And she didn't mind me pestering her with questions about what NOEL likes, what she doesn't like." The nuggets shared by Tiffany will help Sabrina get through the long months of training both she and NOEL will go through before NOEL can join her permanently at home.

Tiffany gives her all to the dogs she trains, the clients who get matched with them, and her two half-brothers. She especially worries about the brothers, aged 17 and 19, with whom she speaks daily.

"I try to stay so close to them to keep them from turning out like [me] ... I ask them



Veteran Sabrina Rigney, right, was matched with NOEL, trained by Tiffany, serving 15 years to life at Lakin Correctional in West Virginia.

about their day. Every day. I try to relate to them ... because I just wish that I would have had somebody doing that for me."

She thinks that if there had been a program with dogs for her when she was younger, one where she could get the caring support and job training she is now get-

ting, "things would have been completely different."

And completely different would mean that Tiffany's fiancé was still alive and she, not serving a sentence of 15 years to life in prison, for providing the drugs that killed him.

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