

## **For Veterans: Magic Happens At Paws for Peace in Maine**

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For combat veterans, it's often about finding ways to deal with the day-to-day.

While research clearly points to the special ability of service dogs to sense the onset of disease or trauma, it's the way these dogs provide security and comfort that makes it possible for an increasing number of soldiers with Post Traumatic Stress and Traumatic Brain Injury to continue on.

Magic happens at Paws for Peace, an initiative of Embrace A Vet (<http://embraceavet.org/paws-for-peace/>), the all-volunteer non-profit organization (501c3) in Maine dedicated to helping veterans with PTS(D) and TBI.

In a quiet and understated way, the team at Paws for Peace does it differently than some of the other service dog programs for veterans. Rather than training the dog beforehand and then placing the dog with a veteran, Paws for Peace has developed a three step protocol where they start with carefully identifying a dog which has not yet had any special service training, then placing that dog with a vet and, after a period time when the vet and dog become companions, putting the two of them together through a 16 week training program and 6-months of follow-up.

"The veteran and the dog learn together," explains Deborah Farnham, the team leader at Paws for Peace and vice president of Embrace A Vet. "This learning step is crucial to our goal to help veterans cope with everyday tasks."



**CREDIT: PAWS FOR PEACE**

“We find that the relationship between the dog and the veteran builds from early on and adds a very special dimension. The learning goes both ways ... for the vet and the dog. They forge a bond and a trust, even a sense of fun when they are in it together,” she adds.

“In short, we place and then train, rather than train and then place.”

When listening to Deborah talk, you hear a passion for trying to help make a normal life for those Maine veterans and their families who live with Post

Interestingly enough, Paws for Peace is just one initiative of Embrace A Vet, founded in 2012 by the late Joy Johnson, who graduated from the University of Maine and spent her entire career in the social services field. The organization provides two other services for veterans and their families in Maine today: healing and wellness retreats and caregiver support programs.

Over the years, it is the service dog program that has garnered the most attention, perhaps because it taps into some very human needs. At the core are simple necessities of life: food, caring for another, unconditional love, support, positive feedback, goal setting, reward and partnership.

The 16 week training program uses all of those.

Here's how Deborah shares the insights and details:

"We set out to combine the best of relationship building with discipline," Deborah says.

*"We get our dogs from shelters. We look for dogs between the ages of one and three years old and select from breeds and mixed breeds that we know do well with people. Each dog is placed with a veteran at least a week before class would start. The dog becomes theirs immediately and goes home with them. Each class consists of 4-6 veterans. The classes extend over 16 weeks. And we have found that the relationship between the dog and the vet builds from the beginning.*

*"A critical component is our feeding protocol. It establishes a bond, a need for each other and reinforces interdependence. The feeding process actually rewards both the dog and the vet. And feeding must be by hand, not in a bowl. This protocol results in the dog becoming totally focused on the veteran which facilitates the training process. Rewarding the dog with food for wanted behavior creates many opportunities for training throughout the day.*

*"The veteran is required to record training activities and times spend doing them throughout the week between classes. Beyond the training we do as a group, the vet and the dog are to log at least 120 hours of practice training, focusing on short sessions of 10-15 minutes each.*

*"Only at six weeks do we bring the dog and the veteran out in public. Great retailers like Lowe's, Home Depot and local grocery stores let us come in and work with the dogs and the veterans. We may stay there an hour or more, making it possible for the dog and vet to become comfortable with what others simply think of as common shopping chores and regular interaction with those walking nearby. Often for the first time, vets start to become familiar with what otherwise would be unfamiliar and sometimes anxious surroundings since many with traumatic brain injury or PTSD rarely venture out.*

*"So, a common bond and partnership between dog and vet build a sense of*

ease.”

“When you see all this happen, it brings tears to your eyes ... it is very special,” Deborah says.



**CREDIT: PAWS**

### **FOR PEACE**

Embrace A Vet and Paws for Peace is completely volunteer and relies on donations: ([www.embraceavet.org](http://www.embraceavet.org)), Post Office Box 516, Topsham, Maine 04086 (207) 449-9149. The cost just to find and adopt a dog and provide the training and follow-up runs upward of \$3,700 each. Beyond that, there's no typical office space. The organization borrows space for training. Professional police canine trainers/handlers and others who have military dog training experience do the training ... adding a special component since veterans typically trust and respect others with military or paramilitary training.

While many organizations that do great work rely on volunteers who give tirelessly of themselves for what they believe in, I heard in Deborah's voice an extraordinarily deep commitment to improving the lives of veterans.

And I am reminded by what Helen Keller is reported to have said:

"Alone we can do so little... together we can do so much."

NOTE – This story is very personal and close to home for both my family and the Farnhams. Deborah's husband John and I have been close friends and classmates for more than 55 years. We are also both Vietnam veterans: he is a retired Navy Commander and I was an Army Captain and helicopter pilot.

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