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Hard working hero dogs for hard working heroes

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A new dog training organization was one of the many unique participants May 14th through May 16th at the 2010 Joint Service Open House at Joint Base Andrews.

Hero Dogs, Inc. is a Brookville Maryland based nonprofit corporation funded by individual and Combined Federal Campaign donations, that seeks to train and place service dogs with military veterans who become disabled as a result of illness or injury sustained while serving their country.

“These dogs make a huge difference for some of these guys,” said Marine Corps. Col. (ret.) Ted Smyth, Hero Dogs spokesperson. “It feels good to give something back to those that give so much.”

Training the dogs takes a year and a half to two years to complete. During the last six months of training, veterans will be paired with their service dog and the transition from trainer to owner begins.

“It is a thorough process that involves interviewing not only the veteran, but their support network of family and friends,” said Col. Smyth. “The dogs need to be in an environment that is just as supportive to the dog as the dog is to the owner.”

Although there are a growing number of organizations that train and pair service dogs with veterans, Hero Dogs sets itself apart from the pack by training dogs that can meet multiple disabilities including mobility, hearing, as well as psychiatric disorders.

“This program can basically teach the dogs anything you want,” said Kirk Simon, owner of a service dog like those from Hero Dogs. “The trainers are good at getting the dogs to do what you need them to do for you.”

The service dogs are trained to help a person with disability achieve independence. The dogs spectrum of abilities range from alerting their owner to important sounds such as a doorbell or phone, opening and closing doors and cabinets, and seeking help for their owner in emergencies.

Mr. Simon's dog, Pilgrim, has had training similar to that of the Hero Dogs and is able to perform more than 40 different commands. Pilgrim can do simple tasks such as picking up fallen objects and returning them, and putting in a load of wash in and moving it to the dryer later.

“Not only can Pilgrim help me with things around the house and grocery store,” Mr. Simon said, “but these dogs are serious chick magnets.”

Libby, short for ‘Lady Liberty,’ is the first dog Hero Dogs will pair with a veteran. She is part of the five to 10 percent of Labradors and other retrievers that enter training and actually make the program.

“Not all dogs are able to handle the stress and demands that these dogs have to endure,” said JoAnn Amann, spokesperson and handler for Libby. “They have to handle all of the noise, even in places like an air show with really loud aircraft in order to do their job.”

The air show, which included the loud engines from the Navy Blue Angels F/A-18 Hornets and the F-22 Raptor, didn't faze the watchful care and dedication of the dogs while at their booth just a few yards away.

“The dogs are focused on pleasing their owner,” said Jennifer Lund, president and founder of Hero Dogs. “They are not pets, but bonded companions that take great pride and respect for their job. “Having a dog from our program will hopefully get their owner to the point where they will be brave enough to leave home again.”

Ultimately, Hero Dogs hopes to produce as many trained dogs as possible that can provide the unbridled enthusiasm and endless commitment to aid that the veterans with multiple disabilities need.

“It's a hard, but fulfilling thing that the dogs do,” Ms. Amann said. “The saying ‘All work and no play’ – very true for a working dog.”