

Golden Retriever Has Healing Powers and a Surfboard

For surf dog Ricochet, helping vets with PTSD is her calling and if they happen to want to hit the waves, she's more than happy to get on board

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Iraq War vet Randy Dexter remembers when he thought about suicide all the time. But then he met a golden retriever named Ricochet, who would forever change his life.

A certified therapy dog living in southern California with her owner, Judy Fridono, Ricochet met Dexter during a six-week Canine Inspired Community Re-integration (CICR) session. Fridono and Ricochet are CICR volunteers.

CICR is run through Pawsitive Teams in conjunction with the Recreation Therapy Department at Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego. At the beginning of a typical six-week session, a service dog is introduced to a military veteran to see what it's like to have a therapy animal.

“After the first meeting with Ricochet, I knew I wanted a service dog,” Dexter said. “I went from someone who wouldn't talk, to someone who wouldn't shut up. Before Ricochet, I thought about suicide all the time. She was my last hope.”

A member of VFW Post 3783 in Ramona, Calif., Dexter served 10 years, nine months and two days in the Army. As a combat medic, he did two tours in Iraq with Special Troops Bn, 3rd Inf. Div. (2005 and 2007).

Just a few months into his first deployment on April 5, 2005, his unit hit an improvised explosive device, and Dexter suffered a traumatic brain injury. It wasn't until four years later he received a PTSD diagnosis.

Dexter's last 14 months of service were with Balboa's Army Warrior Transition Unit. There, he bonded with Ricochet on outings to places such as parks or shopping centers. Dexter

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even had the opportunity to surf, as Ricochet is a renowned surfer, assisting people in the waves.

Fridono said that Ricochet provides “healing energy” for people suffering invisible trauma. Dexter said that was his experience with Ricochet.

“Being hyper vigilant is a symptom of PTSD,” said Dexter, who grew up going to VFW dinners with his grandpa, a veteran of both the Korea and Vietnam wars. “Service dogs allow us to not be that way. They do it for us.”

Fridono said it is remarkable to watch Ricochet with a person experiencing PTSD. With no training, the golden retriever will keep vets away from crowded locations or situations that may elevate anxiety.

“She mirrors the emotions of the veteran she is with at the time,” Fridono said. “She communicates on a level that we cannot.”

Together, Fridono and Ricochet raised \$10,000 so that Dexter could get his own service dog named Captain, who is a “white mutt” rescued in South Carolina by K9s for Warriors.

Incidentally, Dexter was offered a position at K9s for Warriors at its new facility in Alachua, Fla., in 2018. He is the campus director, which includes overseeing the school’s operations at the 67-acre campus and making sure the veterans get there on time for training with service dogs.

Before that offer was made, though, Dexter was preparing for graduate school and had been selected as a VFW-SVA fellow for the 2018 year. He had accepted but had to later decline because of the career opportunity before him.

Dexter said K9s for Warriors is a three-week residential program which pairs a veteran with a service dog.

“We teach everything from laws to grooming to health care,” he said. “We show what it means to integrate your dog into your life.”

Dexter said that K9s for Warriors has rescued 1,089 dogs since it began in 2011. He and Captain advocate daily on behalf of veterans.

“Judy and Ricochet helped me find my purpose in life,” Dexter said. “I promised I would ‘paw it forward.’”

A 10-Year Surfing Dog

Back in California, Fridono has had Ricochet since she was a puppy. The idea was for

Fridono to train her to be a service dog for someone else.

It didn't take long for Fridono to see that Ricochet wasn't a typical service dog. At nine months old, Ricochet was easily distracted by birds.

"I didn't feel comfortable putting her with a person with a physical disability because I couldn't guarantee that she wouldn't go after a bird," Fridono said. "It was frustrating for me because it was as though she shut down and just wouldn't train anymore."

What Fridono would soon realize is that Ricochet was "destined" to be not only a service dog, but a therapy dog.

For more than 10 years, Ricochet has been surfing. She has won multiple contests and participated in fundraisers for people and causes. It seems everyone wanted to watch her surf.

Ricochet's first fundraiser was for Patrick Ivison, a quadriplegic child who is an adaptive surfer. That's the first time Ricochet hopped off her own surf board and onto Ivison's in order to assist him on his board.

While Fridono said there is a definite technique to train a dog to surf, Ricochet wasn't trained for this.

"She's the one who wanted to surf with people who are disabled," Fridono said. "I let her manipulate herself. I didn't tell her where to stand or how to balance. She actually assists people on the board. She takes it very seriously when she is surfing."

Through Ricochet's surfing abilities, Waves of Empowerment was born. It brings veterans together with children who have special needs. The goal is to reduce social anxiety for all participants.

Fridono said it gives the vets an opportunity to be of service again and provides the child with a hero for a day.

Fridono developed the program in honor of her own service and therapy dog, Rina, who died at 13 in 2016.

While riding the waves is what made Ricochet famous in the dog surfing world, Fridono wants people to see the healing side of her companion.

That's why Fridono agreed to let Ricochet star in the Imax movie "Superpower Dogs." One of five dogs featured in the movie, Ricochet demonstrates how she helps alleviate PTSD symptoms in veterans and assists children with special needs.

Iverson has a cameo in the movie, but it's Afghanistan War veteran Persons B. Griffith IV, or Griff as he's known, who was by Ricochet's side during the film.

Ricochet Has 'Soul Vision'

With the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, Griff served twice in Afghanistan — once in 2010 and again in 2014. After his first deployment, he was diagnosed with PTSD.

Griff believes the onset of his PTSD came from the death of Marine Lt. Col. Mario Carazo, under whom he served. Griff drove Carazo to a helicopter, which was later shot down.

Griff said he buried that grief and pushed onward, never dealing with Carazo's death.

"I was diagnosed with PTSD when I came home, and I just shrugged it off," Griff said. "You know, fake it until you make it. I bottled it all up and put on my game face. I wasn't aware how it was affecting me."

In 2015, Griff started going to therapy for his PTSD. He said he went consistently, but that it wasn't helping him. While he didn't feel worse, he also didn't feel any better. Griff said it didn't seem to be helping.

A year later, he met Fridono and Ricochet at CICR at Balboa and was reluctant. He said he was a "hard charger" and by that point had convinced himself that he had no problems at all.

"I was so skeptical before I met them," Griff said. "I scoffed at the notion that a dog could help me."

When he showed up for the fifth week of the program, he took Ricochet's leash from Fridono and started to walk through the park. Ricochet laid down on the path in front of Griff and wouldn't move.

"I sat down and Judy asked me if I was OK," Griff recalled. "At that moment, the wheels came off and it was all right there in my face. Ricochet pulled out of me what was going on inside and encouraged me to be kind to myself. She understood me better than I understood myself before I had met her."

For Griff, it was the beginning of a deep connection and the pathway to healing. It also was the beginning of his love of surfing.

Griff had previously tried to surf through CICR, but it took him five weeks to get chest deep in the water. Once he met Ricochet, he knew he wanted to give it another go.

"If I could, I'd do it every day," said Griff, who lives in Arlington, Texas.

Griff said filming “Superpower Dogs” was “challenging and stressful,” but he did it because he wanted to give back to Fridono and Ricochet.

“Judy is an amazing human being,” said Griff, who stays in touch with Fridono. “There’s no way I can repay her and Ricochet for the life I’m going to have.”

While Griff doesn’t have a therapy dog right now, he is working through his struggles with weekly therapy sessions and is honest with himself — something, he admits, he was not able to do until Ricochet looked inside him.

“I believe every dog is born with a sense of empathy,” Griff said. “But with Ricochet, it’s like a superpower. She has soul vision, like Superman has X-ray vision.”

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