

Service Dogs Provide Comfort to Veterans

'This is the best thing I have ever done in my life'

Feb 12, 2020

Eddie Gunter remembers the day he first met Star in 2013. The pair locked eyes and, according to Gunter, it was love at first sight.

He told the volunteer working the rehab rescue pet adoption area in front of Petco in Hot Springs, Ark.: "That's my dog."

Gunter, a former Army medic and 1991 Persian Gulf War vet, was on his second go-around for in-patient PTSD therapy at the Eugene J. Towbin VA in North Little Rock. The first time, he didn't make it through the program and said that it "didn't work out too well." He was struggling with alcoholism in addition to his PTSD.

But on his second try, Gunter was introduced to VA's service dog program. He met Charlie, a service dog that was allowed to roam the floor where Gunter was staying. The duo immediately bonded.

"The doctor said there was a difference in me during my stay the second time compared to the first time," said Gunter, who served with the Arkansas National Guard at Camp Doha in Kuwait.

"He attributed it to the time I had spent with Charlie."

Dr. Bob Zepecki, a veterinarian in Hot Springs, arranged to have Charlie at the VA. A Vietnam War-era vet, Zepecki knew the calming benefits dogs have around people suffering from PTSD.

As Gunter neared the end of his treatment program, Zepecki let him take Charlie with him to Petco for an animal adoption event. That's where Gunter met Star, and his life changed.

"[Star's] story is one of the saddest you could ever imagine," Gunter said. "She was chained up under a trailer house with a litter of puppies. Now she's my princess. She went from the

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outhouse to the penthouse.”

After Gunter was enrolled in Zepecki’s DAVK-9 program, he got Star certified as a service dog. For the first few years, she went everywhere with him. When Gunter went back to college at Arkansas Tech University — he had started there in 1987 but dropped out — Star went with him. And when Gunter graduated with a degree in psychology, Star was at his side wearing a graduation cap and gown.

The Gulf War vet now is one class and one internship away from having a second degree, this one in rehabilitation science.

“I went to school to learn about myself,” Gunter said. “I just got tired of sitting in a doctor’s office. And who knows? I might be able to help someone else in the future.”

Star still goes out with Gunter, but his PTSD symptoms have improved enough that he doesn’t always take her with him.

“She is pretty popular,” Gunter said. “And she’s a perfect animal. When I get upset, she tugs on me and just looks at me a certain way.”

‘The Best Thing I Have Ever Done’

Zepecki, or Dr. Bob, as he’s known to most, has since helped more than 260 veterans certify their pets as service animals since he started with Gunter and Star.

He makes monthly presentations to PTSD patients at the VA in North Little Rock.

“Dogs give veterans some self-worth because they have to care for [the animals],” said Zepecki, who served in the Air Force and was stationed in Pakistan from 1967-68. “When a veteran thinks a dog can help, that is really the first independent decision the vet has made.”

Zepecki, a 1965 Air Force Academy graduate, said the certification process is not difficult nor is it expensive. If a veteran already has a dog, that dog can be certified. If not, Zepecki recommends adopting a dog more than nine months old. He said lab mixes like Star are generally the best.

For “about \$150,” depending on where a veteran lives in the country, Petco or PetSmart has a basic behavior program for dogs. Once completed, a certificate of obedience is awarded.

If a vet is not in the Arkansas area for Zepecki to see in person, he or she must ask someone to video a walk with their service dog through a store or other public place. That video and the certificate is sent to Zepecki, who then deems whether or not the dog can be certified.

A member of Post 10483 in Hot Springs Village, Zepecki said that he believes what service dogs do for veterans is “a miracle.” He added that many veterans have come back to visit him after they are once again feeling good about life.

“The changes in their lives have been remarkable,” Zepecki said. “This is the best thing I have ever done in my life. I’m going to see this through.”

This article is featured in the February 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.