

'Divine Intervention' Brings Therapy Dog to VFW Post

VFW Post 8545 Auxiliary therapy dog Shadow provides comfort for veterans throughout the Smithfield, Virginia, area

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President of VFW Auxiliary 8545 Cheryl Brown had always wanted to find a way to thank her brother, Lynn Thomas Brown, for his service in Vietnam. So when she got a 10-week-old German Shepherd puppy last year, she knew what she had to do.

Thanks to the generosity of her neighbors in the countryside of Smithfield, Va., Brown was able to purchase the puppy for less than half what it would normally have cost.

Because of her good fortune in getting the German Shepherd, Brown decided to have her pup, Shadow, trained to be a therapy dog for veterans. She thought it would be fitting to have Shadow at the VFW Post for events, such as when nearby VA hospitals bring patients to visit.

In what Brown calls “divine intervention,” she met James Todd, owner of Todd’s K-9 Training, at a VFW breakfast not long after she got Shadow. The pair started up a conversation about training therapy dogs.

“He told me it would cost between \$10,000-\$12,000 to train Shadow,” Brown said. “I told him I’d have to think it over and talk with my Auxiliary members about it.”

Todd, meanwhile, left the Post, but couldn’t get Brown or Shadow out of his mind. A couple of days later, he texted Brown and told her he would waive the fee to train Shadow.

“This is just one little thing I can give as my thanks to the awesome men and women who give us our freedom,” Todd said. “The day I met Cheryl, God told me to talk to her. She told me her story, and I knew I had to help. It is truly a blessing to be training Shadow for Cheryl.”

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At 10 weeks old, Shadow was in training to help veterans with PTSD, anxiety and depression. Brown said she was amazed that Shadow really didn't need much encouragement.

"It's like God had been training him for this," she said. "He is the best thing that has ever happened to me. He's so smart. When you put his vest on him, he knows he is going to work."

Brown said she sees the difference the now 1-year-old Shadow makes when he is around veterans. She recalled the meeting between Shadow and a disabled vet named Fred. The veteran was wheelchair-bound and didn't speak and seemed very depressed when he arrived at the Post from the VA.

Fred and Shadow immediately bonded, and when the veteran left later that day, he had a smile on his face. Brown said Shadow, too, was smiling.

"The attachment of Fred and Shadow actually put smiles on everyone there that day," Brown said. "And I still think about it all the time."

Because the community has been so supportive of Shadow, Brown said, she contacted the Smithfield Police Department in November to offer Shadow's services. He is being trained as a tracking dog and will be used for missing person searches.

"I would like to see every Post have their own therapy dog," Brown said. "Shadow has changed our Post. There is such closeness now. He's not my dog, but our dog."

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