

Connecting With Canines

Veterans bask in the company of dogs

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Over the last five years, VFW Post 3769 members in Pikeville, Kentucky, have weekly basked in the energetic and affable company of canines.

Dubbed “Veteran Dog Days at the Pound,” most veterans from Post 3769 took up the weekly tradition after Quartermaster Darian Hylton realized the power of canines in holistically helping veterans struggling with PTSD.

“This has directly helped seven [of our] veterans,” said Hylton, who based his decision on the book, “War Dogs: Tales of Canine Heroism, History and Love,” by Rebecca Frankel, which details how the military utilized canines, specifically during the Iraq War. “For veterans, it causes them to take care of something. It gives them a purpose again.”

While venturing into the pages of Frankel’s book in 2017, Hylton and his daughter also began visiting the local Pike County Animal Shelter weekly, where they petted and walked dogs. The more he read about therapeutic canines helping service members with PTSD, coupled with his personal experience, the more Hylton desired to invite others in sharing the experience.

Every Wednesday since, Hylton has welcomed a growing group of fellow veterans and community members into the animal shelter at roughly 10 a.m. for “Veteran Dog Days at the Pound.” The weekly event allows veterans, in particular, to connect with the canines, as well as find purpose in helping socialize them before adoption.

“Dogs have the mentality of about a 3-year-old,” Hylton said. “So with the therapeutic dogs, they [veterans] get up in the morning, feed, water and exercise them. During all of that, it’s the socialization. It’s very common for veterans with PTSD to get into plant care, and once they get comfortable with that, then they will get into other things like working with people or working with animals.”

Though the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 slowed the process of welcoming more and more volunteers to bask in the benefits of connecting with canines, Hylton is hopeful that

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numbers will grow steadily in years to come. He added, however, that part of the hesitance in potential volunteers falls on the perception that they must adopt upon visiting.

“A lot of people consider this too hard because they think that every dog wants to go home with them,” Hylton said. “That’s not true. Now, the big thing that the dogs like to do is to get out and be dogs — sniff the grass, sniff the trees and mark their territory. They are just happy with a visitation.”

Among the horde of Post 3769 members joining Hylton at the animal shelter each week, Vietnam War veteran Billy Ousley remains a most frequent devotee to visitation hours.

“Once I came up here with Darian, I just kind of got hooked on it,” Ousley said. “It’s fun to get them out, play and kind of socialize them a little bit. I just love dogs.”

Hylton, Ousley and other members of Post 3769 welcome any and all volunteers to the Pike County Animal Shelter for what could help propel the process towards healing in the company of loving canines. For more information, visit [“VFW Post 3769 Pikeville Ky” on Facebook](#).