

Manny is an ideal therapy dog because he's outgoing but has a calm demeanor even in noisy situations. "The breed is rather calm and laid back," Lori Wright, his handler, says of Clumber Spaniels.

Manny the Man

Clumber Spaniel wows as USO Therapy Dog

By Jen Reeder





Manny smiles with Lori Wright.

The day was hot, and the tower was tall. Members of the Pennsylvania National Guard stared up at the building they were charged with climbing, then rappelling down as a training exercise at Fort Indiantown Gap—the busiest National Guard training center in the United States last year.

Some service members were facing the challenge for the first time and struggling with a fear of heights while relentless flies pestered them.

Tension was high.

Jenna Anderson, USO Senior Area Operations Manager in Pennsylvania, vividly remembers the moment that everything changed. A car pulled up, and an affable Clumber Spaniel named Manny climbed out of the car and headed to greet the soldiers alongside his handler, Lori Wright.

"What started with a rappel tower and looking at service members standing at the bottom that were terrified to get up on this tower to Manny coming out of the car—just the light in people's eyes completely changing, the tension going, seeing their shoulders slack a little bit," she recalls. "Manny was giving them hugs before they went up and then again when they came back down."

It's all in a day's work for the 5-year-old dog, who is one of over 150 therapy dogs who volunteer with the USO Canine Program at 131 locations in 34 states and territories and 11 countries.

"Our mission is to strengthen the well-being of our service members, and I think that is done in a lot of ways, especially our canine therapy dogs as we're seeing when it comes to mental health: the stress, the overload," Anderson says. "I have a service member that always compares it to a football game. If you have a big football game and nobody in the stands is cheering you on to keep your morale up ... you're not going to fight as hard. So, I think the USO and

Photos Courtesy Lori Wright, except where noted



Manny in a Chinook helicopter

the canine program has really added … to be those cheerleaders and help boost that morale to get them through the hard times."

Boosting morale is a role Manny embraces at least once a week at the USO Center at Fort Indiantown Gap—and his unusual breed adds an extra level of excitement and engagement for service members.

A Special Breed of Therapy Dog

Lori Wright has had Clumber Spaniels for over 35 years, yet no one she's met during therapy dog visits has ever said, "I have a Clumber Spaniel at home." Instead, while service members pet Manny, they ask her all about the breed and relax while talking about her dog and theirs.

"You see them come in and they're pretty stoic looking, pretty serious looking," she says. "And then they see Manny and their face lights up and they immediately come to him, and I hear so many times, 'Oh, I miss my dog. I miss my cat.' And it just breaks the ice for me to ask, 'What kind of dog do you have? Tell me about your dog.' And an hour later, they're still petting Manny. We're still talking. And you can just see how much they've relaxed from when they came through the doors. Just somebody different to talk to, somebody that gets it. When you're a dog person, you're a dog person. And you're talking to another dog person."

One of Manny's signature moves is offering hugs to friends both old and new.

"When he wants to do it, he'll give a hug on command," Wright says. "If they go down on one knee, he puts his front feet on their upper leg and then puts his head on their chest."

That's the kind of charm that makes service members ask, "Is Manny here today?" when they first arrive at the USO Center. In fact, Manny is always a "big hit" at the USO, according to Command Sergeant Major Mike Chirdon of the Pennsylvania Army National Guard.

"'Manny the Magnet,' I call him, because soldiers are so drawn to him. Everyone starts smiling as soon as they see him, an instant morale boost," he says. "And Manny clearly doesn't mind all of the attention from his fans."

He's right. At home whenever it's time to leave for a therapy dog shift, Wright will say to Manny, "Let's go see soldiers," and always gets an enthusiastic response since he loves the work so much.

She's delighted to have found such an ideal therapy dog opportunity for Manny. They were already volunteering as a therapy dog team with the nonprofit Caring Hearts, often visiting ill or injured children staying at the Ronald McDonald House in Central Pennsylvania.

"Kids can be afraid of dogs but by the time we part ways, they're (lying) on top of him. They trust him, they adore him," she says. "It's pretty amazing."

After a shift nearly two years ago,



Manny is famous for giving hugs.



Sometimes service members will see Manny and drop to the ground to pet and hug him, according to his handler, Lori Wright. "I've heard that before: 'I need you, buddy.' 'I've had a stressful day.' 'You've really helped,'" she recalls. "That's just worth everything."



they attended the Harrisburg Dog Show and met a volunteer from the USO, who told them about the need for more therapy dogs at the USO Center at Fort Indiantown Gap and elsewhere.

Since her gentle dog is outgoing and loves people, but sheds and drools a bit too much to volunteer in a medical facility, Wright thought the USO Canine Program could be a perfect fit. Plus, her father was a World War II veteran who served in the Army, so she feels strongly about supporting members of the military.

"We just need to be there for them in whatever capacity we can give," she says. "And I can give the benefit of a special, wonderful dog and having his presence there. They need that stress relief; they need that normalcy. They can't see their own dog, but to see any dog can be very important for them."

An Open Invitation from the USO

Because therapy dogs like Manny can make such a positive impact for service members, the USO's Anderson hopes other dog lovers will consider volunteering with their dogs. Any breed can participate, as long as they're certified with a therapy dog organization.

Sometimes a USO Canine Program therapy dog is the last dog a soldier sees before deploying overseas, as Manny has been—even going to Philadelphia International Airport to see them off.

"Lori is one of those people that just says, 'You tell me where I'm needed. I will travel, I will go,'" Anderson says. "She feels and sees the impact directly with Manny and is always more than willing to hop in her car and meet them where they are."

That's the kind of dedication by USO



photo credit here





Lori and Manny at AKC USA 250

Canine Program volunteers that fills Anderson with gratitude for the meaningful way they give back to the men and women serving in the military.

"I think there's a big importance of making sure they know we have their backs," she says. "So being able to be in a center or assist with the USO program and show those service members that we're supporting them, whether we know them personally or not, makes a big difference in the heart and eyes of a war fighter."

For her part, Wright finds volunteering with Manny incredibly rewarding and hopes others will, too. She and her late husband always prioritized finding activities their Clumber Spaniels would enjoy, including AKC conformation shows, obedience and tracking competitions, and Fast CAT—aka Coursing Ability Test—which is a timed 100-yard dash in which dogs take turns chasing a lure. While Manny's mother, Cameo, adores Fast CAT, her son favors therapy dog work.

Wright sees Manny's calling as a win-win.

"Therapy dog work is just Manny's thing," she says. "I think there's a unique place with the USO that more dogs could take advantage of if they're looking for therapy dog team activities. The USO is just wonderful. And our military, they need it. So do it." **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the Dog Writers Association of America in 2025.

The AKC Therapy Dog Program recognizes AKC dogs and handlers who help others as a therapy dog team, with official titles for dogs ranging from AKC Therapy Dog Novice for completing 10 visits to AKC Therapy Dog Distinguished for 400 visits. Therapy dog work builds on the skills taught in the AKC S.T.A.R. Puppy and Canine Good Citizen programs. Click here for more information.

For more information about volunteering with the USO Canine Program, visit your local USO Center or: *uso.org/canine*.

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