

In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder

Liberating Labs

Prison inmates train Labs to be service dogs for veterans

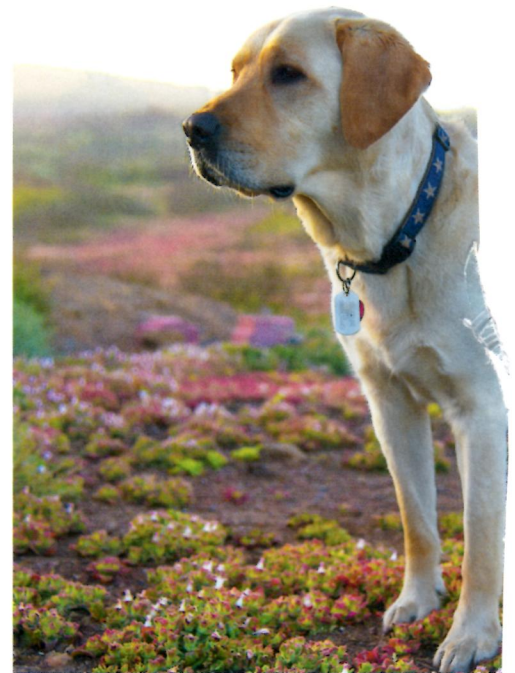
Scott Ostrom is only 32 years old, but he’s already led an intense life. As a United States Marine, he served two tours in Iraq in 2005 and 2006 with a platoon hunting for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi when the terrorist was one of the most wanted men in Iraq. As Ostrom says with pride, “We got him, too.” But he lost many friends in combat, and he returned home suffering from traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and chronic pain from injuries.

He found it difficult to adjust to civilian life – “I got in fights a lot” – so a fellow veteran suggested he get a service dog. On January 23, 2013, Ostrom traveled to Fishkill Correctional Facility in New York to train for 16 days with a yellow Lab named Tim, who had spent several years being trained by an inmate

through the nonprofit Puppies Behind Bars. The affable Lab learned 92 commands, which now help him support Ostrom in daily life.

“Tim trains me to be a productive member of society,” Ostrom says. “His whole job is to train me.”

The bond between the two is clear as Ostrom and Tim walk through



Tim (Photo by Scott Ostrom)

their town of Telluride, Colorado. Tim constantly looks to Ostrom for approval as he showcases some of his skills, whether he’s asked to *dress* by stepping into his service dog vest; *block* by standing between Ostrom and a stranger; or *salute* by raising a paw to his forehead. “That’s the best icebreaker. It totally changes an uncomfortable situation,” Ostrom says.

Ostrom credits Tim with helping him overcome drug addiction, repair damaged relationships, and learn to handle confrontations with humor and tact instead of yelling or violence. For instance, when people make snide comments that it doesn’t seem like Tim is “working” and they should be able to pet the dog, instead of getting angry, Ostrom diffuses the situation by joking, “He’s actually on a conference call right now,” or, “He’s checking my e-mails.” The people typically laugh and move on.

“Tim’s definitely changed my life,” he says. Naturally, he’s grateful to the organization that brought them together. He admires Puppies Behind Bars for using positive training methods and is impressed by the devotion of the trainers. Any preconceived notions he’d had of meeting prison inmates vanished while he trained with Tim at Fishkill.

Inmates and veterans at Otisville Correctional Facility. (Photo by Peggy Vance)





Scott Ostrom and Tim.

“There’s their redeeming quality right there,” he says, pointing at Tim. “The way a man treats his dog is a direct reflection of his soul.”

Thousands of male and female inmates from six prisons in New York and New Jersey have trained Labs through Puppies Behind Bars. Founded in Manhattan in 1997 by Gloria Gilbert Stoga, the nonprofit initially trained Lab puppies to be guide dogs for the blind. But when countless military veterans started returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars with PTSD and/or TBI, the group’s focus shifted. “The

need was great, and I just really felt that I should be doing something for the men and women who are fighting for our country,” Stoga says.

So she works with a select group of breeders to procure confident yellow, chocolate, and black Lab puppies for her organization. At eight weeks old, the pups are paired with an inmate with whom they’ll live 24/7. Labs who train as service dogs for veterans spend up to three years training in prison (inmates may also spend one year training Labs to be explosives detection dogs for law enforcement through another Puppies Behind Bars program). Volunteer civilians take the

dogs out of prison during the week and on weekends so they can easily adjust to life in a home after “graduation.”

“What’s unique about the dogs raised in Puppies Behind Bars is that human bond, that human interaction,” Stoga says. “That’s what’s singular about our dogs.”

As Lab lovers know, the breed is fantastic at bonding with humans. Stoga says Labs are exclusively used in the program because they’re friendly, nonthreatening, resilient, and easy to groom. They learn standard service-dog skills such as turning lights on and off, fetching items, and dialing 911 on a special phone if their handler slumps in a wheelchair or drops to the ground.

Puppies Behind Bars dogs also learn nine special commands for veterans, such as *wake up* if their handler has a nightmare. With *clear*, the Lab is trained to enter a dark room and turn on the nearest light, walk backward about 10 feet into the room, do a 360-degree circle to make sure the room is safe, then come to the veteran’s side in a *heel* position so they know it’s okay to enter. Another custom command is *tell me a story*, in which the Lab makes physical contact with their handler if they’re lying on the floor to prompt them to talk about their war experiences.

“A lot of times our men and women haven’t talked about war to anyone,” Stoga explains. “This gives them the



Veterans show their appreciation at graduation. (Photo by Peggy Vance)



(Photo by Peggy Vance)

opportunity to open up to the dog and tell a live being that is non-judgmental the horrible things they witnessed in war.”

She says Labs from the program have helped veterans stop contemplating suicide, get off their medications, and strengthen their family bonds.

“I know it sounds like a cliché, but the dogs really do transform lives,” she says. “There’s an abundance of wonderful stories about the impact the dogs have had on inmates as well as veterans.”

Kevin Rowland, service dog trainer/evaluator for Puppies Behind Bars, first got involved in the program in 2011 while he was serving time. As a dog lover, his initial motivation was to have a canine companion help him through the last four years of his sentence. But soon after he was partnered with a Lab puppy named Albee and moved to the dog-training wing of the prison,

he immersed himself in the program and became a group leader, helping other inmates with any training issues. He says training the puppies teaches inmates patience, communication skills, responsibility – they must have clean disciplinary records to participate – and helps rehabilitate them to rejoin society.

“We literally took care of them like they were our own dogs. We learned how to groom them. We learned how to train them. We taught them proper behavior. We turned these eight-week-old puppies into fully working service dogs,” he says. “Everybody was so involved with the dog training that you kind of even forgot where you were for a while... they make life worth living while you’re in there.”

His second charge, a chocolate Lab named Harley, graduated the same week that Rowland was released from prison. Though he vows never to return

to prison for committing a crime, he frequently re-enters penitentiaries for 16-day stints as a trainer and instructor through his job with Puppies Behind Bars. While it’s strange for the first day or so, his focus on training the dogs, building camaraderie with the trainers, and partnering Labs with veterans make it all worthwhile.

“There’s nothing better than seeing somebody you think is a good person being able to move on with their life,” he says.

Clearly, Puppies Behind Bars helps Labs realize their potential, as well as the veterans they serve and the inmates who train them. As Rowland said: “For me, personally – and I’m sure there are a lot of people who would say this – it’s probably the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me.”



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is an award-winning member of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed “crazy dog lady” after she and

her husband adopted a loveable Lab mix named Rio. Please share tips for future columns about Labs and working dog organizations that help make our world a better place at: jen@jenreeder.com.

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about Puppies Behind Bars, visit:
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