



Operation Freedom Paws

Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team

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Operation Freedom Paws

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Find us online at:

operationfreedompaws.org



**K9 Coach Plus has now been folded into Operation Freedom Paws, therefore, all proceeds will benefit OFP.*

Founder's Message



Photo by Janier Weisholz

"Thank you for your support in 2013! We are excited to welcome 2014, as we have lots of new things on the horizon. Please keep in mind that while we are raising awareness about invisible disabilities, we are also teaching the public about what a service dog does. When people place vests on their pets and try to pass them off as service dogs, it does a disservice not only to the highly-trained service dogs, but also to the person who has an invisible disability. The struggles these people overcome on a daily basis do not need to be compounded by strangers questioning the legitimacy of their service dogs. Whenever possible, please make an effort to educate and change the perceptions of people who are unaware of the critical roles service dogs play in assisting people with invisible disabilities. With your continuing help we hope to have another fantastic year of changing lives and leaving paw prints on many hearts!"

"Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team."

Mary Cortani

Founder and President

2013 - A Year of "Firsts"

2013 was an exciting and challenging year for our organization. Publicity from Mary Cortani's 2012 Top Ten CNN Hero designation helped raise public awareness of issues being faced by veterans and encouraged many to reach out to us for assistance. Class sizes doubled, so we added three new mentor-trainers (recent graduates of the program) to help with teaching. This allowed us to break into smaller groups of teams working at similar levels.



Photo by Vicki Taylor

Three new trainees in Southern California were added to our roster in 2013. In addition to doing daily homework with their dogs, each remote client Skypes weekly with one of our mentor-trainers; Mary travels to train them in person once a month as part of this pilot program.

We continued to expand our presence on Facebook and asked a volunteer to take on the responsibility for managing our Twitter account. Social media allows us to assist people in remote locations who don't have access to a trainer and are therefore training their own service dogs---a practice that is allowed by the ADA and which we wholeheartedly support.

Upcoming Events:

□ St. Patrick's Day Dinner

Traditional Irish Dinner and hosted Beer & Wine.

March 17th, 2014

5:00pm to 10:00pm

San Martin Lions Club
12415 Murphy Ave San Martin, CA 95046

Purchase tickets online at eventbrite: ofpstpatricks.eventbrite.com

Tickets are \$45

Have fun with friends!

□ 3rd Annual Golf Tournament & Dinner Reception

Gilroy Golf Course & Old City Hall

May 3rd, 2014

We sincerely thank the many people who offered to help OFF this year. Services were donated by our marketing firm, accountant, legal counsel and printer. We added a Volunteer Coordinator who is herself a volunteer. Another became our Marketing and Event Coordinator and a third in Clovis (two hours away) took on the challenge of fostering dogs for us in the commercial-sized kennels at her home---Mary has taught her how to select shelter dogs who show promise for service work. We have also been the fortunate recipient of a few Guide Dogs of the Desert "career change" dogs. These are animals who either have a physical imperfection or too much "spunk", which requires they be paired with a sighted handler. And we are thrilled to oblige!

As seen in the previous newsletters, we held our annual golf tournament fundraiser on Memorial Day weekend, a second golf tournament in Las Vegas and our first dinner dance at a local winery. We published our first two quarterly newsletters. We created our Amazon Wish List, which has generated an amazing and gratifying response. Donors provided equipment, toys and treats to help us supply everything new clients needed to get off to the best possible start with their dogs.

2013 by the numbers:

- **19** six-hour public access tests were conducted to certify new service dog teams, nearly double the number certified in 2012:
 - **12** veterans (63%)
 - **5** civilian adults (26%)
 - **2** children (11%) who certified along with a parent
- **45** new clients were enrolled in the program, a 55% increase over 2012.
- **100** new applications were received, a 200% increase over 2012.
- **52** rescued dogs were either matched with clients or put into foster care for future matches.
- **30%** reduction (from \$13K to \$9K) in the average direct cost to train an OFF service dog, due to discounts & donated services/equipment.

A Peek at 2014

We are still on the hunt for a new facility. In order to expand as an organization to serve the many veterans and other disabled people contacting us for help, it is critical that we find larger quarters.

Building our relationships with other organizations will be the key to growth over the course of 2014. We will leverage our established partnership with DreamPower Horsemanship, to increase awareness around the Bay Area about the missions and accomplishments of both organizations. Our association with Guide Dogs of the Desert will expand. Mary is enhancing their training programs by traveling once a month to Southern California to work with some of their veteran clients who, in addition to being blind, are also dealing with the challenges of PTSD and/or limited physical mobility. Our mutually-beneficial affiliation with Camp Tuolumne Trails will continue; two more family dog camp weekends are planned for this year.

We have multiple fundraising events for this upcoming year. Kicking off with our St. Patrick's Day fundraiser, we also will have our annual golf tournament, wine event, holiday photos and much, much more! Keep informed by checking our website and Facebook page for upcoming events.





Awards

2012 CNN Top Ten Hero

2011 Napa County Red Cross Hero

Commendation / Proclamations

2013 Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors

2013 Gilroy Chamber of Commerce Good Egg Award

2012 City of Gilroy

Application to Certification - The OFP Process

Operation Freedom Paws is often the last resort for veteran and civilian applicants. Many have reached out to other organizations, been put on waiting lists for years on end, or been told that there are no resources available to help them. They often feel discouraged, defeated, singled-out, and alone.

Application: Although asking for help the first time is very difficult for most veterans, those interviewed insisted that applying to OFP wasn't as hard as they expected. One veteran, mentor-trainer George, said, "What have you got to lose? Try this last thing. That's how I was looking at it. I tried everything. Nothing else works." But OFP did. After two years of hard work, he has a certified service dog, a better relationship with his family, and an opportunity to help other veterans as an OFP mentor-trainer.

Interview: Each applicant completes a one-on-one interview with OFP founder Mary Cortani. For most, meeting Mary is a huge sigh of relief because it can mean the start of a better life. For some, the interview can be uncomfortable—meeting in an unfamiliar

place with a stranger, talking about their deepest struggles and desires. But, the need for help overrides their temporary discomfort.



Match: Mary matches each client with a dog that has been either rescued from a shelter or donated by another organization. She personally screens each dog for temperament, personality, and drive to be sure it is suitable for service dog work. George was matched with a medium-sized black dog that he thought was too small. He described his initial reaction to his dog: "Yeah right. I'll just wait, fail with this dog, and ask for another dog." He still has that dog today, a testament to Mary's matching prowess.

Training: Training is at the heart of the program; it begins immediately after the match and never truly ends. One veteran said that the training process "seems longer because I've only missed about 3 classes. I go to all 4 of them every week." Luckily for OFP clients, we have some of the best trainers around. Mary and her team of mentor-trainers, Jeremiah, George, Jeff and Janet, work diligently with clients every day. The OFP training program requires 300 hours of class and 600 hours of at-home training in order to prepare for certification.

Bond: There are two components to this relationship: the bond between client and service dog, and the bond between client and the "OFP Family." Developing and recognizing the bond between client and service dog is a critical component of the training process. Dogs often bond quickly with their clients, well before the clients are aware of it. One veteran reported, "Honest truth, some of the stuff I heard from Miss Mary and the rest about how the animal can sense it before we even know, I was like, 'yeah right'. My opinion on the way I look at animals has changed a lot—a lot. Miss Mary was right. Your dog knows more about you than you know about yourself!" After clients become truly aware of their dogs' attentiveness to their needs, they are bonded for life.

The bond between clients and the "OFP Family" is also essential. Many veterans and others with disabilities feel isolated and uncomfortable interacting with other people. Training together gives clients what Mary calls "a safe place" where clients learn to feel more comfortable being around others. This confidence translates into their personal lives and helps their day-to-day lives to be more fulfilling. Once clients realize that OFP



is not just about training dogs, the real change develops. George said that he “started realizing that this is more than just dog class. You know, in the Marine Corps, you have the Band of Brotherhood. I started getting that bond with Operation Freedom Paws and that’s what changed.” OFP truly becomes family to many of us.

Certification: When Mary sees that a client/service dog team is ready, she schedules a date for the 6+-hour public access test required for certification. The team completes various tasks in public settings, while Mary and her trainers observe. They look for demonstration of skills, a clear bond, and pure focus between service dog and client. After certification, clients often continue to attend training sessions to maintain skills and camaraderie.

So, what’s the bottom line? The whole process, from application to certification, is about improving the lives of our veteran and civilian clients alike. It’s a group effort and the growth and training never end. George put it plainly: “The program works. You’ve got nothing to lose but you’ve got everything to gain.” Remember, as Mary always says, “Everything every day is a training opportunity.”



How You Can Help

- Look us up! We offer public obedience training too! Proceeds from these activities help support our nonprofit work with veterans and other individuals with disabilities.
- Have time to volunteer? There are youth and adult volunteer opportunities. Contact Volunteer Coordinator Colleen at colleenofp@yahoo.com
- Make a secure credit card donation by using the “Donate” button at <http://operationfreedompaws.org> or send a check to Operation Freedom Paws at the mailing address listed on our website.
- Shop on Amazon? Use Amazon Smile  and a percentage of your total is given to your favorite charity; which we hope is OFP.
- Click the “wish list” button to purchase an item from the Operation Freedom Paws Wish List. Your gift will go directly to a service dog team. 
- Proclaim your love for OFP by purchasing your very own “swag” from our new online store (linked to our website).
- Like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter
- Come support us at our next event!



an award-winning local program

