

Meet Giana and Romeo

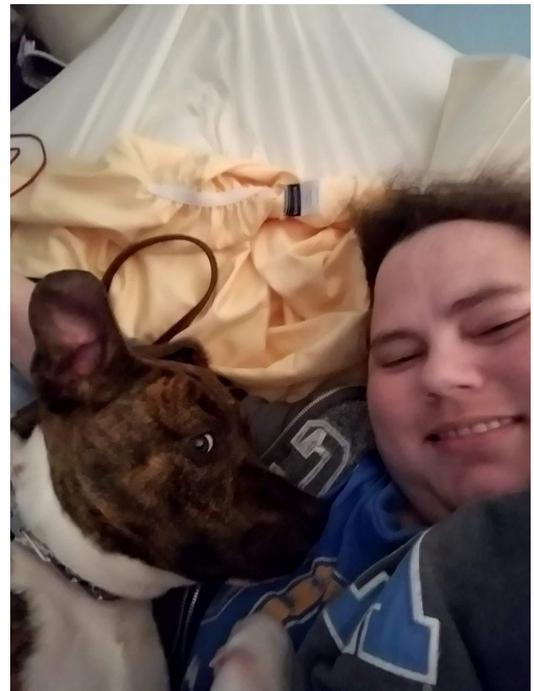
A Love Story

I was accepted into the service dog program at OFP on October 4, 2017. Operation Freedom Paws was my last hope. For years I had bounced between programs, doctors, and hospitals, trying to find help, but at that point, help was elusive. I was what my doctors referred to as a “tough case”. I was dealing with multiple physical and mental illnesses, many of them lesser-known issues that were difficult to treat and rarely seen in people my age.

Prior to my first brush with illness, I was a classic overachiever, excelled in school, and played the tuba in the UCLA marching band. I fell ill towards the end of my freshman year at UCLA with what would eventually be diagnosed as fibromyalgia and migraines. I struggled to complete my degree but finally graduated with a BA in English. I immediately started teaching back home in the Bay Area. While I loved my job, I was getting sicker and sicker. As time went by the diagnoses piled up. Rheumatoid Arthritis. Bipolar. C-PTSD. Sjogren’s. Gastroparesis. OCD. I was constantly in and out of the hospital and was told twice that I would not live to see the next day. (Spoiler alert: I did.) At the age of 32, I was completely unable to walk and spent Christmas in a convalescent hospital where the next youngest person was in their mid-80s. I had to take a medical leave from my job, which later became permanent.

For years I lived in a numb nightmare. I developed severe agoraphobia and refused to leave my house. Really, I rarely would even leave my bedroom, and would spend hours blasting hardcore music and pacing. I had insomnia so bad that I often would go days without sleep. When I did sleep I had horrific nightmares. My anxiety was through the roof and fueled the OCD and agoraphobia. My body was failing and my mind was ANGRY.

At one point, I had to switch to a new psychiatrist, and was surprised when he asked if I had ever considered getting a service dog. At that point I really only knew you were supposed to leave them alone in public, but I had no idea what they could do for someone like me. Weren’t service dogs only for the blind and people with epilepsy? He gave me a prescription for a service dog and directed me to OFP. I quickly applied and was put on a wait list. I was so impressed by OFP and their mission that I decided that I wanted to volunteer at the center while I was waiting. But agoraphobia is cruel, and so for the next year I was in a vicious cycle of volunteering to come and then cancelling at the last minute when I realized that I would have to leave the house to get there. To this day I am amazed that I ever got off the wait list with behavior like that, but Mary and Janet took a chance on me and called me in for my interview.



My interview was at 4:30pm on October 4, 2017. I woke up at 4am, before the sun was up, to begin the lengthy ritual that my anxiety told me needed to be done before I left the house. I had roughly an hour drive to get to the center, so I did what any good, anxious person would do and I left my house at 11am. For a 4:30pm appointment. After killing some time at the In-n-Out near the center, I finally rolled into my interview about 2 hours early. I have never been more nervous in my life, but Mary saw through the fear and accepted me into the program.