

OPERATIONFREEDOMPAWS



OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS IN 2022



A LETTER FROM OUR FOUNDER:

DO NOT WORRY ABOUT THE FUTURE, BUT KNOW IT WILL BE PROMISING

Operation Freedom Paws is more than a traditional service dog organization. We not only provide a dog and train the handler on how to use that dog for their medical needs, we also identify services that tie into that training - services that are sorely needed by our clients and their families.

We truly treat each client as an individual, because no two clients are the same. This approach requires that we constantly evolve and expand our resources and services. As mentioned in past newsletters, we have forged new relationships to help provide healing moments where things “click” for our clients and keep them moving forward. These relationships are possible because our staff is vigilant about researching new methodologies, policy changes that affect those with disabilities, and identifying other groups that provide services which align with our mission. Whenever possible, we partner with these organizations to give our clients the best possible resources and experiences that empower them on their journey to achieve a new normal. The dogs are the key that opens the lock so healing can begin. But then our team provides the additional tools to help our clients complete the healing process. We never know throughout the course of the program when a healing moment is going to occur for an individual. When it does, it's magical! Everyone at Operation Freedom Paws shares in this rewarding experience, knowing that we have saved two lives in the process.

Taking a holistic approach allows us to mitigate difficulties our clients face, and as life and societies change, so does our approach. Just as the military teaches individuals to adapt and overcome, we as an organization must be adaptive and overcome challenges. When looking at services to add to our program, we evaluate the impact on our organization, the lives of our clients, their families, and their communities. Not only do we continue to look at adding new services to the program, but we are constantly evaluating our current services to see if improvements can be made. We want the quality of life and the freedoms that our clients experience to continue to expand, allowing them to see the hope and believe in tomorrow.

Founder's Letter (cont'd)

All our services remain consistent in this messaging, "Take life one day at a time. Do not worry about the future but know that it will be promising." While it is important to address the past, most of our clients' triggers are embedded there, and dwelling only keeps the wounds open rather than allowing them to heal. We teach our clients to focus on their dogs in times of distress and this allows them to live in the present moment, bringing them back from the brink. The services that foster this would not be possible for our clients without donor support. As you read through this newsletter, please consider your donations and possibly making a monthly recurring donation equivalent to the cost of one Starbucks coffee or more per month ... every little bit helps. A monthly recurring donation makes a lasting, profound impact on the organization and most importantly, those we serve.

With Gratitude,
Mary Cortani, Founder and Executive Director of Operation Freedom Paws



Todd and His Service Dog Ivy

"I Am Not Broken"

I am now six months free of my self-made hell and have been given an opportunity to look back, reflect, and share with others about the time leading up to my nightmare. It's interesting that on the day I finally decided to put my experience down on paper, I received a text from friends with whom I went through an intense PTSD residential treatment program together. It was sad news. One of the fellow sufferers in our program had taken his life. This was not the first, and even more tragically, I knew it wouldn't be the last.

In case you haven't read my amazing wife's article in the last newsletter, my name is Todd. I am an Army Vet from the 10th Mtn. Division and a firefighter/paramedic from a city with over 100,000 people that is home to Arizona State University. I forced myself to retire because of PTSD and where self-medicating had left me after 27 years. During my life I have been the son of a wonderful mom and an incredible father who passed away when I was twenty as well as a big brother to three incredibly loving siblings. I've fulfilled roles as a rescue diver, tactical rescue person, hazmat tech, been in charge of members' welfare for my department and served as a president and board member of several city



programs. I've also been the recipient of firefighter awards, I tell you this information not to boast, but to help you understand that it all means nothing when you suffer from PTSD. I felt unworthy and alone. I isolated myself and spiraled to the depths of my own anxiety and depression.

Just six months ago, I was on the brink of ending my life, feeling like I could not go on anymore. I was tired of trying and failing and couldn't stand thinking of the possibility of disappointing one more person, especially my family members. The only way to stop that would be to stop "me". I look back now and

can't believe who that person was and what he was doing to his life. I look in the mirror today and I can see "me" again. I know I don't have to be perfect, and I can function amongst the living.

I have just now started to be able to talk about what I was feeling then. I am learning to accept help, and most importantly, realize now that I am not "broken". I understand that bad things can

Todd and His Service Dog Ivy

"I Am Not Broken" (cont'd)

happen to good people. I don't have to live looking back in shame for the things I did during those dark years. I am now able to recognize and accept that I did do some good for others. This didn't happen overnight. It started with one person who knew me for less than a week and cared enough to say "don't give up; there is hope."

I was told by Eric, who I met at an amazing Mighty Oaks Program, that I should try to get a service dog to help me cope with my PTSD. The fact that Eric was there as a client, and not a facilitator, shows you where his heart was. I started applying and was promised that I would be able to get a service dog. I began to feel hopeful. But I was quickly disappointed when the facility I contacted refused me a service dog because I lived out of state. You can only imagine what went through my head. It was validation that I was not worthy of such a gift. They did give me the number to another facility, but I told Eric that I could not face another disappointment and was not going to call. He continued to beg me to call. He was not going to give up on me getting a dog. And it was because Eric did not give up on me that I was introduced to one of the most amazing individuals I have ever met, Mary Cortani. I did not know it at the time, but Eric had called ahead and spoke to Mary about my situation.

I remember vividly the day when Mary and I first talked. The call was one of those forever moments. It gave me the first light of hope I had seen in years. Not only did Mary exude such confidence in me but she offered me hope to save my marriage, which I knew I no longer deserved. The call ended with Mary asking me if I was willing to put in the work, and if I was, she would teach me how to train a dog that she would choose to become my new battle buddy. She also told me to invite my wife to come to the facility so she could help her understand the complexities of PTSD. For the first time, I was giving my wife the ammo to go on with her life with or without me but knowing I would never stop loving her. I was hopeful that there was a small possibility that she could give me one more chance. But Mary emphasized my job was to just work on me. Little did I know what kind of journey Mary was about to send me on.

I cannot count the number of speed bumps on my journey that Mary and my new partner, Ivy, helped me to negotiate. These obstacles would normally have spun me off the road and sent me crashing again. First, I didn't get to choose my dog. It was obvious at this point my decision-making skills were lacking. Mary uses dogs pulled from shelters or rescue groups to match up with the clients. Who knows what magic she uses to choose your partner, but it's perfection. I think she has a Harry Potter-type sorting hat in her office.

My first introduction to Ivy was out of a movie. In my mind I needed an incredible, strong, courageous K9 type. But Ivy is a sophisticated, stunning, loving, head-strong soul. She came out, ran up to me, and gave me an actual hug. This was not the jumping up and licking you type of scene you are probably imagining. Instead, it was a gentle, actual wrap her arms around my waist, bear hug, and she would not let go. It's exactly what I needed, and Mary and Ivy knew it.

There are so many lessons and situations that came up that helped me claw my way out of my hell, but I would like to focus on what I would call my first miracle. Before PTSD, my family and I would go on vacation to Virginia during Halloween and enjoy all the scary things it had to offer. The pinnacle of the trip was always Busch Gardens when they would turn the theme park into a giant haunted house. And at this point, besides me tearing my marriage apart, my relationship with my daughter was



Todd and His Service Dog Ivy

"I Am Not Broken" (cont'd)

very strained, to say the least. I was six weeks into a 48-week program and my bright idea was to take my family along with my new untested partner, Ivy, to San Diego for that same kind of Halloween thrill.

We got there at dark and were waiting for the gates to open. I was looking around and kept thinking to myself, "Where are all the dogs?" That's when it hit me, "What was I thinking bringing a dog to a scary place where zombies jump out of bushes with chainsaws and there is yelling going on everywhere?" I had to trust that Mary would not have allowed me to go if it wasn't possible. Hours into it, Ivy was doing amazing by keeping me calm and confident while I was enjoying my family again. Then I made the mistake of leaving Ivy with my wife so that my daughter and I could go on a ride together. It was an incredible bonding moment for my daughter and me. It was only possible because of Ivy and the lessons learned at OFP.



After the ride, we met back up with Ivy and my wife. Ivy was quite upset. I had made a bad decision and left my battle buddy with someone she didn't really know. I was not able to confidently calm her down afterwards and felt it best to leave my wife and daughter at the park so I didn't ruin the rest of my family's time there. Ivy and I went back to the hotel. During that long drive home, all I could think about was how I let Ivy down and ruined the possibility of reconnecting with my daughter. I felt that, yet again, I had failed and disappointed my loved ones. But what really happened, according to my daughter, was that Ivy presented the opportunity for her dad to show her that he was willing to take a chance on being her dad again.

That event started a dialog with my family and allowed me to open up about what I had been feeling during my dark years and be totally honest and vulnerable. I was able to talk about my suicidal thoughts, how scared I was and how much I loved them. It also allowed me to genuinely apologize for my inaction as a husband and a father. My daughter opened up and allowed me to once again feel I was needed for the first time in years. I was able to ground myself and not run away because my battle buddy wouldn't leave me. Ivy didn't judge me; she placed her head in my lap and loved me. That was the

breakthrough I needed. When my family drove home, I received a text from my daughter reading, "I have my father back." The flood gates opened; I could "feel" once again, I was no longer numb to life.

Sure, during the next five months there would be ups and downs, but Mary and Ivy were always there to let me know they loved, supported, and believed in me. So, I was able to get up after every fall. I imagine I feel like what a terminal cancer patient might feel like who is living every day past the day they were supposed to die. I now cherish every minute of every day since the day I chose not to leave this earth. I WANT TO LIVE. I know Mary would say it was all me, but I know Mary and Operation Freedom Paws have given me a second chance at life - a chance for my daughter to still have a father and for me to stay happily married to the love of my life, my incredible wife. I have a ways to go still and I know there will be more obstacles, but I have the confidence to keep going and not give up. Please if you are reading this and you are suffering, do not give up. There is hope. You can be happy again. You just need a dog and the will to put in the work.

-Todd

Welcome Our New Ambassador Therapy Dog Team Sergeant Ed Soares And Duke

Delivering Healing with a Side of Shenanigans

We're proud to announce our new OFP Ambassador Therapy Dog Team - Sergeant Ed Soares and Duke! They served as distinguished partners in the Menlo Park Police Department for the past six years. Duke is certified in narcotics detection and has been the recipient of the Award for Canine Excellence (ACE) from the American Kennel Club. Sergeant Soares and Duke are not new to an ambassador role; they have attended school and community events, visited children's hospitals, and brought their spirit of service and shenanigans wherever it was needed on behalf of the police department.

Recently, Duke was retired from service as a K9. And while one chapter of this partnership has come to a close, we're thrilled they're embarking on the next chapter with us! This dynamic duo has been longtime OFP supporters and advocates for our mission. In 2021, Sergeant Soares coordinated with fellow K9 officers across the country to successfully fund a service dog team in our program. We have no doubt that having this team on board will amplify our ability to reach and help more veterans and first responders with disabilities and their families. Sergeant Soares shared, "Mary and I have some grand ideas on how to utilize Duke and me as a Therapy Dog Team to bring peace, joy and our own brand of shenanigans."

The team has recently been undergoing training and testing to learn OFP protocols and procedures. Working closely with Mary and our mentor-trainers, this highly experienced and committed team is on the fast track to becoming certified. Duke has already passed 3 AKC tests: Good Citizen and Advanced Good Citizen as well as Urban Canine Good Citizen. These tests required Duke to proficiently navigate an urban setting with many different distractions and obstacles while staying obedient and on task. If the ribbon and huge smile didn't give it away, Duke did it with flying colors. Up next, our OFP Therapy Dog Team will have to go into a group setting and perform all the necessary tasks of a therapy dog, all while being evaluated on skill and ability.

In looking forward to their new mission together, Sergeant Soares said, "as proud as I was to have Duke wear a police harness as a Certified Narcotics Detection K9, I'm prouder for him to wear his new red therapy dog harness created by K9 Tactical Gear. Being retired as a police K9 team doesn't mean our work is done; we have so many more lives to touch." We have no doubt this amazing team will do just that!

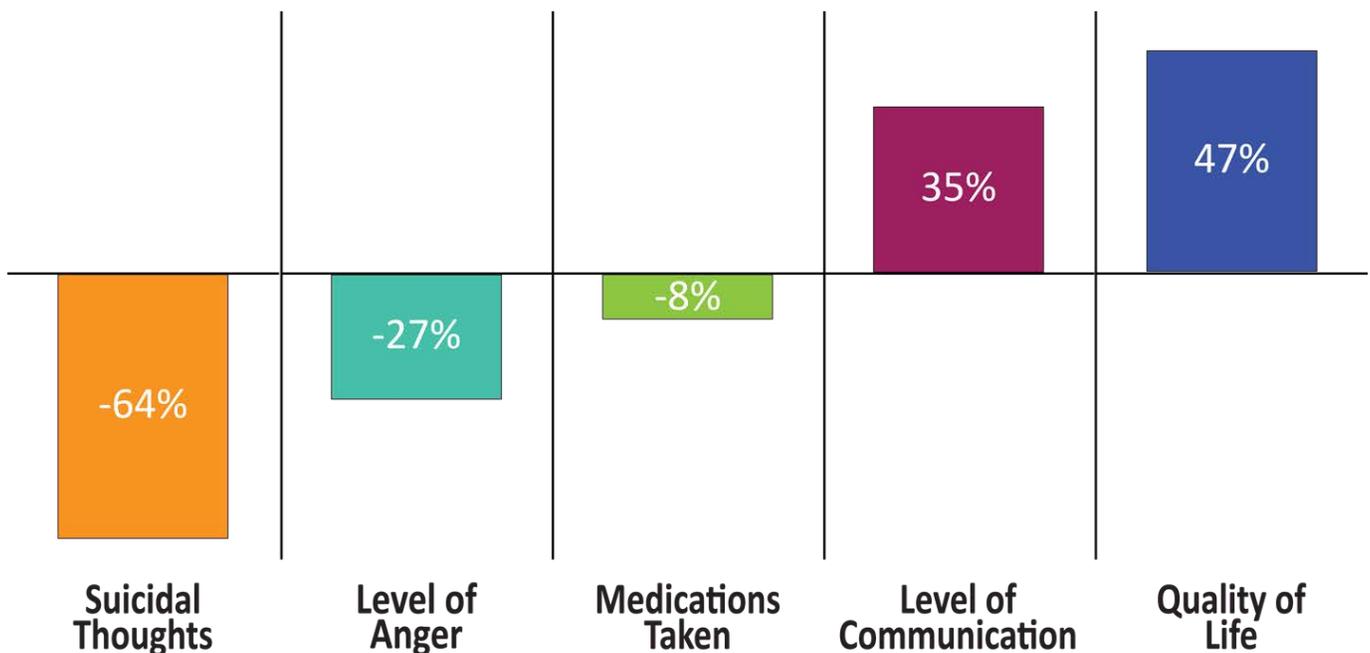


OFP Graduate Exit Survey

The Real Impact of the Program

We are proud to serve veterans, first responders, children and other individuals with disabilities of all ages, branches and diverse backgrounds. Currently 70% of our applicants are veterans. OFP recently had the rare honor to welcome a Korean-era veteran into the program. Supporters empower us to give clients the resources they need to regain their independence, reconcile relationships, start careers, engage in their communities and heal wounds, both seen and unseen.

Our graduate exit survey is a vital resource because it allows us to measure the real impact of the program on the lives of our clients and their families, based on direct feedback received from our clients. We are always honored to share how their hard work in the program and your support are making lifesaving changes possible. Here are our latest graduate exit survey results.



 <p>Trang with Lucky</p> <p><i>"Lucky and OFP lit a candle of hope in me when I had none. I am blessed that I had the opportunity to be a part of this group and go on this journey of self-discovery and healing."</i></p>		 <p>Veteran Sean with Manny</p> <p><i>"I spent 3 years in my house. I never left. Now I go to the grocery store by myself or I run to 7-11 for snacks. Manny and OFP gave that back to me. I am even a homeowner now! I wouldn't have any of that without Manny and the people at OFP."</i></p>	
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OFP Daycare and Boarding - 24/7 Kennel Services

An Update from Renee, Director of Operations

In this newsletter we would like to cover the importance of staffing our facility 24/7. First and foremost, kennel staff are here to care for and help train the OFP dogs we pull from shelters and rescues. Kennel staff help prepare them to be matched with new clients to become service dogs. They support our clients and assist them with things their dogs' needs such as food, medication, nail trims and baths. Our kennel staff alert our program team to any issues a client might be facing so they can receive the timely support they require. And yes, that is a 24-hour a day commitment. The kennel staff keep an eye on all the dogs round the clock, making sure they are safe and cared for, just like they would be at home. They treat the dogs as if they were their own.

Most owners tell us their dogs get very excited when arriving at our facility and go home better behaved. That's one of the best compliments we can receive.



We know it's not easy to leave your dog(s) when you go away. But rest assured, when your dog(s) board or stay for daycare with OFP, they get the same 24/7 care and handling as our OFP dogs and all our staff are trained to leash handle each dog in the same way. Consistency = Happy Dogs. And that all comes down to staying true to our core beliefs when it comes to care and training. What are they?

OFP follows the TEDD (training, exercise, diet, discipline) philosophy:

TRAINING:

Every dog is to follow our basic commands: "heel", "sit", "wait" (whether it's at a gate or for food), "through", "off", "leave-it", "settle" and "quiet". These practices provide not only physical exercise, but they stimulate a dog's mind. Getting a "Good Sit!" will actually boost the pleasure center of a dog's brain.

EXERCISE:

Dogs are walked a minimum of four to six times a day, rain or shine. We also provide two playtimes a day either individually with a kennel technician or in a supervised, controlled playgroup.

DIET:

We feed the dogs who stay with us two to three meals a day based on their individual profile, as well as provide healthy treats and KONGs for lunch. KONGs provide extra mental stimulation and keep dogs focused on a task during quiet/nap time.

DISCIPLINE:

Our consistent, routine, and safe practices are critical for proper care and the dogs' welfare. Each dog is placed in a specific location in our kennel depending upon their individual temperament, size, challenges, age, medical history and behavior. And we make sure every guest also gets adequate quiet/nap and sleep time.

You want the best experience for your dog(s), and so do we! So, thank you for choosing OFP for your daycare and boarding needs. All proceeds from our kennel services benefit our OFP Service Dog Training Program and help to save lives at both ends of the leash.

Event Fundraising Highlights

We Love Our OFP Community

FEBRUARY - THE ANNUAL CRAB FEED TO GO

We asked supporters to “Crabby Diem” and they did! They purchased meals, merchandise, and volunteered their time and resources to make our crab feed to-go fundraiser a sold-out success! All of the proceeds from the meals we sold are going directly to provide needed resources to our service dog teams. Whether supporters enjoyed the crab, chicken cordon bleu or veggie polenta, it was all delicious! We want to thank Fran, Bobby, Wendy and their team at Old City Hall Restaurant for the yummy main courses, and another thank you to Donna, Ray and Oscar at Costco, Gilroy for the beautiful custom cakes. Both businesses did a beautiful job and helped to offset our costs to raise more funds for the mission.



MARCH - THE ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT PASTA FEED & SILENT AUCTION

It was a wonderful night where supporters enjoyed an assortment of all-you-can-eat pasta, thanks again to the amazing team at Old City Hall Restaurant. The FunFenny Combo, aka Mark Fenichel and Tom Drake, were serving up some great live music that kept everyone entertained. Our new Ambassador Therapy Dog Team, Sergeant Ed Soares and Duke, brought smiles to the room as they connected with guests, and so did Mary, when she announced that OFP just welcomed its 488th client, thanks in large part to our supporters.

Gratitude to all who attended, donated meals, volunteered, made in-kind donations, and participated in our wine pull, drawings and silent auction. And a big congrats to all the winners!



OFP 2022 Upcoming Events:

When You Participate, You Make a Difference!

It's just a hop, skip and a jump away! Join us for the OFP Community Easter Egg Hunt on Saturday, April 16th. We'll have a bouncy house, face painting, and of course, an Easter egg hunt for kids ten and under. Entry is free, the Easter egg hunt is just \$5.00 per child. And please, for the safety of everyone in attendance, no pets allowed, only service dogs.

We are now welcoming sponsors, in-kind donors and volunteers for our upcoming OFP Golf Tournament and “Paws with Patriots” Wine Gala. Some of the most popular in-kind donations are sporting event tickets and memorabilia, day trips and excursions, vacation properties, jewelry, art and culinary experiences. Interested in becoming a sponsor, in-kind donor, or volunteer at an event? Please contact Pam or Scott, at 408.683.9010. Your sponsorships, donations, and volunteer efforts are all instrumental in helping us save two lives, one team at a time.

SAVE THE DATES!

Your Attendance Empowers our Mission!

April 16, 2022

OFP Community
Easter Egg Hunt
OFP Canine Education Center
San Martin, CA

June 3, 2022

OFP 11th Annual Golf
Tournament
Coyote Creek Golf Course
Morgan Hill, CA

August 6, 2022

OFP 11th Annual
“Paws with Patriots” Wine Gala
OFP Canine Education Center
Gilroy, CA