

OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS



OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS IN 2020



We are three-quarters of the way through 2020. It has been one heck of a year - with ups, downs, things going sideways, and challenges, to say the least. People all over this country and the world have been feeling anxious, scared, isolated, confused, and so much more.

Here at Operation Freedom Paws, we teach our clients to look for the positive, even when things feel dark, and they're struggling. There is always a triumph, no matter how small, to be found. We call this philosophy "dancing through life." We teach our clients to partner with their dogs for this dance.

There has been a lot of loss this year in a multitude of areas, yet when we stop and reflect, there have also been a lot of gains. Where there is darkness, there is also light; we just need to look to the horizon and the heavens above. Gratitude changes the brain. Count your blessings big or small each day. You will soon see them add up.

As of this newsletter, I am grateful for each of the 437 clients OFP has gotten the opportunity and pleasure to work with, as well as their families. I am grateful to our volunteers, donors, supporters, followers, staff, board members, and customers. I am also grateful to each and every one of you who has taken the time to read this newsletter, our posts, and who watched our first venture into livestream events with our concert series. Thanks to the donors and bidders during those events; we were able to gain 10% of the funds needed to continue to operate. Yes, we are 60% down, but the blessing is, it's no longer 70%. And we've been able to welcome new clients into the OFP family!

As we come into the last quarter of 2020, we hope and pray you will help spread the word about OFP, and please ask your family and friends to donate, so that we can continue to save two lives, one team at a time. Our four-legged and two-legged friends need your help. It truly does take a village.

We started this journey with our clients 11 1/2 years ago. And in September, we began our 10th year as an official non-profit. The need to do what we do is even greater today than I ever imagined back in January of 2010. Will we remember the sacrifice of those who put on a uniform every day and risked their lives to give us the freedoms we enjoy every day? COVID has given us an opportunity to see in a small way what trauma and isolation can do to someone. Help us stop the suicides among our veterans and first responders. Every life is precious. You can make a difference. 22 suicides a day is too many.

These are unprecedented times. Be kind. Be grateful for the small things. Be open and do not judge. You never know what someone is going through in their lives. Please [donate](#) and spread the word. We need your help and deeply appreciate it. Dare to dream, believe and find your superpower!

Mary Cortani
Founder and Executive Director

Kim and Artemis

Everything is a Communication

My first personal exposure to a working dog was on my way to basic training after joining the Army in 1989. Waiting for my plane at some U.S. airport, I saw a man in fatigues sleeping on the ground in a corner with a German Shepherd sitting in front of him. The dog was watching over its handler, protecting him, preparing to alert him if anyone got too close. The dog allowed people to take pictures without issue. One person indeed crossed whatever line the dog saw as appropriate and the canine's demeanor instantly changed, becoming focused, sitting taller, with a clear intent to warn the intruder away. Immediately I knew that I had picked the wrong job. I wanted what that soldier had – a constant companion that would always have my back and look out for me. That sense of safety and belonging, of not feeling alone in the world.

When my VA psychiatrist recommended that I apply to Operation Freedom Paws (OFP), I wasn't sure what a service dog could do for my PTSD, anxiety, and depression. I'd had pet dogs before so I knew the companionship would be nice. But I had no idea to what extent my life would be impacted. By this point in my life, I thought I was pulling myself together and doing well. Being results oriented, I could point to a bunch of stuff I had changed on the outside, things people could see and measure: I had successfully exited my career as a paramedic, quit smoking, improved my diet, gotten married, found a job serving people without sacrificing my soul, been to talk therapy several times, become articulate, and started getting regular medical and psychological care. As much as I could outwardly prove that I was improving my life, inside I was still detached, isolated, alone, abusing alcohol, depressed, angry, and still believing I would someday die by my own hands. Suicide seemed inevitable - just a matter of time and circumstance since I had lost 14 people close to me to various forms (including my brother, father, uncle, and step-brother; my living parents with a plan in place). The rest of my family had disowned me for being queer. Needless to say, I did not see people as reliable. Life experiences had taught me that all relationships were designed to be short term. Having lived at more than 30 addresses by the time I was 25 also meant that there was no place that felt like home. I felt alone, always, everywhere, every day.



When I married my wife, Tam, I told her I wanted a pet dog. We joke now that we purchased a house so that I could have a dog. Two weeks after moving into our home I saw the picture of a dog that seemed to be looking right at me, calling me through the internet! I brought Artemis home from the SPCA as a pet the next day. The dog had issues. While sweet and gentle she was clearly in survival mode, over-stimulated, untrusting, scared, reactive, and would definitely wander without a leash. Now, of course, I can see that I was drawn to her because she was mirroring my inside state already. Three months later, we started training at OFP!

Literally, I cannot find the words to explain the bond between a trained service dog and its handler. It is different from every other relationship I have experienced. Dogs are all about love and do not have an abusive or manipulative bone in their bodies! I trust Artemis more than anyone or anything else in my life. Understanding her and what she is trying to communicate to me in a given moment, however, is constant work. The first month in training with Artemis I felt incredibly vulnerable. Everyone else

Kim and Artemis

Everything is a Communication (cont'd)

seemed to understand not only that my dog was alerting but specifically to which issue she was alerting! I felt like a child relying on my parents to translate the world for me. Eventually Artemis and I developed our own language, and we work together well now. We certified as an OFP Service Dog Team in 2019 and became a mentor trainer team immediately thereafter. As a mentor trainer, my goal is to try and help other people build that bond with their dog. Mary says, one of the best ways we can teach most lessons is by listening to our own dog's alerts and responding to them. What was not my goal was to teach this concept to clients by having a crisis of my own!

I am a healthcare worker in the Monterey VA clinic. When COVID-19 hit the U.S. in early 2020, I stopped teaching and attending classes at OFP. I didn't want to potentially bring the virus there. I also moved out of the house I share with my wife and moved in with a dear friend I work with at the VA, so my family would not be exposed. My friend, Erin and I helped set up and run the COVID-19 swab program at the Monterey VA, so our exposure risks were initially pretty equal. Then on April 6, 2020, I was deployed to the Palo Alto VA hospital as support in anticipation of a COVID-19 patient surge. While there during the work week, I stayed in the Defender's Lodge. Already away from my home, my wife, and OFP support, I did my best to manage living and working in Palo Alto. Artemis and I faced being around all new people, in a new work environment, performing a new job, and living in housing that looks very much like a military barracks. There was constant stimulation, noise, light, and very little privacy. Artemis and I tackled this challenge together.

I struggled. My efforts to maintain balance included: training walks with Artemis 1-2 times per day with focus on noise desensitization, attempting to maintain a healthy diet, writing and videoing my experiences, beginning a qigong practice, self-studying guitar, taking computer software and other online classes, signing up for vocational rehabilitation, and basically just keeping myself busy. I thought I could at least survive a month like this and deal with the damage when the deployment was over. By the end of April, I would sit and watch TV for hours, isolate, and ignore my dog's alerts because I felt powerless to address them or improve my situation. I used more medication to try and sleep at night and used more medication during the day to numb my anxiety. I was not being honest with myself or my wife about how badly I was struggling, and my dog returned to being fearful and reactive. I could see the road I was heading down because I'd been there before: depression and denial.

On Monday April 27th, I returned to work and walked into the locked, controlled access room where I



was temporarily working to find that the air conditioning had been shut off over the weekend due to a power outage. The heat in the room triggered flashbacks to past sexual trauma and I began my rapid downward spiral. That night I sat in my room and stared at the wall for hours, experienced an increase in violent flashbacks and nightmares, until I took enough medication to knock me out. The next night I gave in to my desire to numb out and bought whiskey. Next came the craving for cigarettes and passive suicidal thoughts. Finally, on April

28th, my birthday, I got drunk and as I was passing out in bed I remember thinking I should roll to my side in case I threw up during the night. Then I decided against it and thought that might be the best way to resolve all of my problems - and I went to sleep.

Kim and Artemis

Everything is a Communication (cont'd)

The next day I went to work hung over and full of shame. After work and a short walk, Artemis and I returned to our room. She didn't eat supper; that was a first. She began to cough, hack, and gag for reasons that I couldn't identify. I feared she had a foxtail stuck in her throat! After trying to ease my dog's discomfort for three hours, I finally reached out to Mary. I described what was going on with my dog and sent her videos of the concerning behavior. After watching the videos Mary's voice relaxed. That's when I knew I was in trouble. I knew she wasn't going to tell me to rush to the emergency vet. Mary said that what she was seeing was an extremely stressed-out dog. Then she asked how I was doing. She asked me about myself. She reminded me that my dog's behavior is a reflection of my inner state. I listened. I cried. I shared honestly. Then I looked over at my dog; she was now laying happily on her bed, chewing on her bone!!! Mary and I laughed for several minutes about how "dogs don't lie". See, now that I was talking, crying, and seeking assistance, my service dog was giving me clear communication that I was doing the right thing. When I went home that weekend, I told my wife everything, I also emailed my medical and psychiatric VA doctors to ask for help.

For the next three weeks I was off work to heal and recover from, what my therapist called, "a confluence of triggers". I eventually attended OFP classes again, not participating initially, just being there. I talked to the therapists that OFP pays to have present at every class session. I was surrounded by my peers and felt their support. Slowly, very slowly, I came back to myself. My service dog and I are now closer than ever. And the little moments that I previously thought were cute, or a dog just being a dog, I now know are meaningful. Everything is a communication. While I am writing this, she is under my desk, at my feet, napping. When I started writing about the moments that were hard to go back to and feel again, Artemis very casually stretched out her paws so she could touch my feet.



That is communication. Even when she is resting, she has my back. When I am driving down the road and she steps forward onto the center console and leans against my right shoulder or kisses my cheek, I know she is communicating. She is reminding me to stay present because I'm in my head too much. I am learning to read her whiskers, tail position, and eye shape more and more. It is all meaningful. I am now convinced she knows all the secrets to the universe!

I don't feel alone in this world any longer. I have a connection to my dog and to a few humans I have learned to trust because of her. I feel safe and protected. But I still cannot find the words to explain to you the bond I have with my service dog. It is ever-growing and all-encompassing. She is part of every aspect of my life. She is happy to go to work every single day which has completely changed my outlook about my own job. She sees people she likes and gives her happy howl! Because you have to tell people that you love them! I got a service dog to help with PTSD, anxiety, and depression. My service dog actually helps me with all of that plus: pain management, stability, food allergies, anger management, finding exits in stores when I get overwhelmed, and even with social skills. I know there is more she is helping me with that I have yet to identify. She is part of everything I do and is teaching me that I can live life out loud, pursue any goal I choose, and she will be there with me.

Kim and Artemis

Everything is a Communication (cont'd)

I cannot write this piece without acknowledging Mary and her constant support. Once you are in the OFP program, you have OFP support for life. As soon as I stopped coming to OFP due to COVID-19, Mary began reaching out every week. When I was deployed, she began to reach out every other day. Others reached out as well, but since Mary taught me how to communicate with my dog; I trusted her. And I know I wasn't the only person the folks at OFP checked in with regularly. It was/is a long list. But they offered support to, and continue to support, many people who are struggling with distance and isolation for various reasons. In many ways, Mary and her staff are busier now than before COVID-19 supporting both certified and current clients. And they are still taking on new clients! Not only have Artemis and Mary given me the increased freedom and ability to do things I enjoy again, but they have also saved my life. Because of them I desire to do more and have the confidence that I can make subtle but impactful changes to improve my life. As Mary says "Everything, every day, is a training opportunity."

-Kim & Artemis



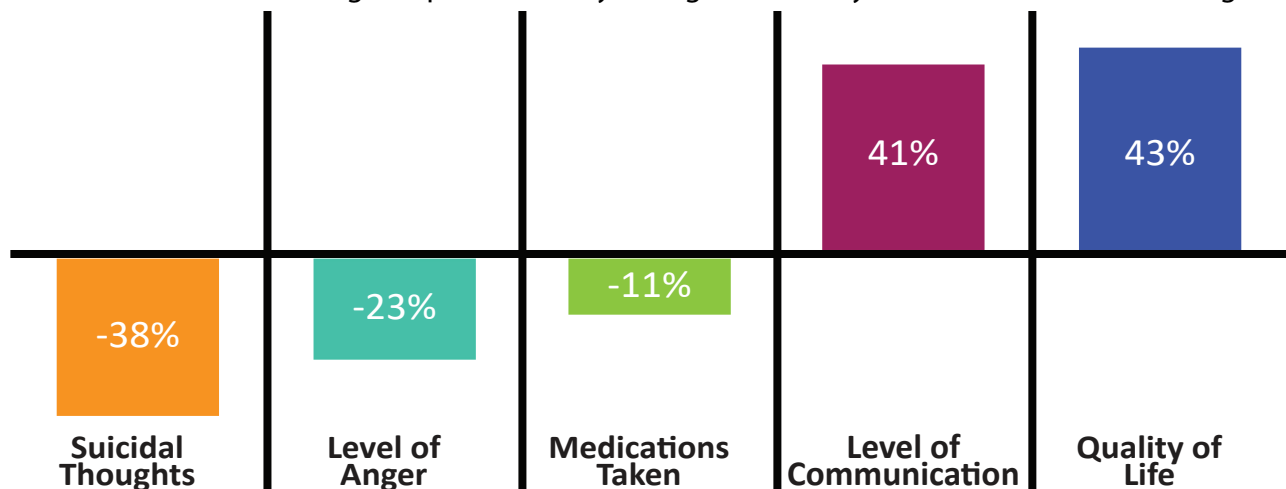
A Partnership To Promote Veterans' Mental Health

Operation Freedom Paws is honored to be partnering with Johns Hopkins University in a two-year research study to examine how service dogs impact the quality of life for veterans who suffer with PTSD and service-related trauma. Almost daily, we see the profound and life-saving ways service dogs change our clients' lives, like Kim, for the better. We hope this comprehensive study will lead to more concrete insights and funding to support and serve the needs of our military veterans and their mental well-being.

Real Impact Numbers from OFP Graduates

Since COVID-19, we've probably all experienced moments where we feel isolated, depressed, anxious, or uncertain. Imagine those feelings compounded by PTSD, a traumatic brain injury, or other life-threatening physical and psychological injuries. For our clients, that's something they face every day. That's why it's so rewarding to see the coping skills our OFP Service Dog Teams develop throughout their training. An alert, a nudge, a wet nose can be THAT THING that grounds and SAVES SOMEONE!

Here are some of the tangible, profound ways our graduates say their lives have been changed.



OFP Daycare and Boarding

An Update from Renee, Director of Operations

2020 has been an interesting year. Many of us have been home behind closed doors for quite some time. In the last few months, we've been working with our doggy guests who need exposure to the outside world, resetting their social skills, and providing good ole outside exercise. This is something our Daycare and Boarding facility has always provided.

And yup! If you didn't know it, we offer Daycare and Boarding services to the public. We first opened our facility to the public on October 18, 2014. The fees help fund our non-profit mission, which empowers veterans and individuals with disabilities to restore their freedom to live life, by pairing them with rescue dogs and training them together to become OFP Certified Service Dog Teams!

Our Daycare and Boarding facility is staffed 24/7 - including holidays. We do book up quickly around that time, so we suggest customers make reservations now.

How do you become one of our valued customers? Give us a call at (408) 683- 9010 to schedule a tour/evaluation appointment. You'll need to bring your pup and current vaccinations that include Distemper/Parvo, Bordetella, Leptospirosis, Influenza, and Rabies.



So now that you know we are not your typical Daycare/Boarding facility, we hope you feel good about the fact that when you use our services, you not only support our kennel, you support our non-profit mission. And the OFP Kennel Team provides your dog with round-the-clock individual care in a safe, loving, fun, clean, and educational environment. We serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and administer any needed medication. We also welcome and love senior dogs. Guests outdoor time includes 4 to 6 walks a day (rain or shine) and 2 daily playtimes in our large play yards (pool and toys galore included!). For our overnight guests, we provide beds, cots, mats, and blankets. Customers are also welcome to bring something from home too!

We believe in giving back to those who have served or continue to serve us, so veterans, first responders, and healthcare workers will all receive a 10% discount and our gratitude. Every pup and customer, service dog and client, K9 and officer, that comes into our care is part of our family. That's the OFP family way!



2021 CALENDAR - CELEBRATING A DECADE OF OFP AS A NON-PROFIT

In September 2020, Operation Freedom Paws kicked off its 10th year as a non-profit! In the last decade, we've been proud to help empower 437 clients, 2,140 families and rescue 375 dogs.

We've watched our clients gain the coping skills through our training program to open up their worlds and become better mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, colleagues, and friends. Clients who have stepped into their purpose have become doctors, social workers, advocates, and even trainers and mentors here at OFP.

This calendar will celebrate a decade of our OFP community, and the clients we call family. Look for the calendar release in November 2020!



OFP SUPPORTERS ROCK OUR FIRST LIVESTREAM MUSIC SERIES



Operation Freedom Paws hosted its first livestream concert series and silent auction on October 3rd and October 10th! The OFP All Stars with Mikey Day rocked the virtual house and Joe & Alison Sharino delivered a beautiful and intimate performance. Our incredible hosts, 94-5 FM's Jona Denz-Hamilton and the President of the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce, Mark Turner, did a fantastic job of keeping us entertained and the events flowing. Both nights were filled with great music, moving testimonials by our founder, Mary, our clients Kim, Chau, Johnathon and his mother Susan, and some amazing auction items, thanks to our auction donors! We love you!

We would also like to express our deepest gratitude to our sponsors, The Ford Store Morgan Hill, Family Pet Care Center, and Le Pooch Dog Grooming and Boutique, as well as our very generous angel donors and sponsors. Special thanks to our production crew, audio engineer Sandro Costa at Full Force Sound and Light and Anthony Urbina, livestream & production by Dan McFarren, David Campbell, and Yahaira Linet at Motivational Misfits, our graphic artist and Army veteran, Ray Barcomb, testimonial videos and photography by Vicki Topaz, IT guru Alan Chan at Shadow Operations, and Jennyann Thilmany for her fundraising efforts and for bringing the artists to us!

Finally, to all of you who watched, bid, and gave at a time we know is challenging, we cannot thank you enough. Together, we are providing OFP active clients with the resources they need to thrive and helping new clients start their journey toward their best lives. THANK YOU!



Operation Freedom Paws
777 First St. PMB 515| Gilroy, CA 95020
"Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team"®

OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS HAS PUBLISHED A CHILDREN'S BOOK!

It's been a labor of love and now it's here! Our founder, Mary Cortani is a published children's book author! We're excited to announce her collaboration with co-author Connor Quinn, and illustrator Susan Szecsi, to bring to life the service story at the heart of Operation Freedom Paws, *"Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team."*®

"Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team"® is a book about a rescue puppy named Dakota who grows up to become a service dog. Dakota is found in a field with his brothers and sisters and taken in by a woman named Mary Cortani, who runs an organization called Operation Freedom Paws. As Dakota grows up and dreams of becoming a service dog, he is eventually matched with a combat veteran suffering from PTSD. As they train together and bond, Dakota goes from being rescued to being the rescuer.

"Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team"® is now available for pre-order on these sites: [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), [Barnesandnoble.com](https://www.barnesandnoble.com), [Walmart.com](https://www.walmart.com) and [Target.com](https://www.target.com), with the official release date on #GIVING TUESDAY, 12/1/20.

Proceeds from *"Four Paws Two Feet, One Team"*® go to fund the real life OFP Service Dog Teams at Operation Freedom Paws. Just in time for holiday giving, it's THE GIFT THAT GIVES TWICE.

