OPERATION FREEDOMPAWS



OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS IN 2020



<u>A Letter From Our Founder</u>

What a challenging and unpredictable year 2020 was in so many ways. As a nonprofit, it was a year that made us push harder, explore new creative avenues to keep going and keep serving our mission and our clients, who continued to inspire, move and motivate us every day.

2020 brought a series of heartbreaking events that proved the work nonprofits are doing is needed now more than ever. Sadly, the impact of the pandemic and economic uncertainty has caused many of our nonprofit colleagues to close their doors and lay-off their staffs at a time when their services are needed most.

Everyone here at Operation Freedom Paws is humbled and honored that our donors and supporters stepped up, despite their own challenges, to enable us to survive and continue to save lives, both two legged and four legged. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts!

With a new year, there's new hope and we believe in the hope 2021 brings. But there is still an uncertain future in front of us and we're committed to providing our clients with the resources they need to meet the additional challenges along their healing journey.

Throughout the past year, we've adapted and overcome obstacles to keep moving forward. We grew into virtual events, got creative with concerts and silent auctions, and shared a powerful work in progress for the documentary, "DOG WALK HOME." OFP had amazing new volunteers step forward to help, participated in podcasts and virtual summits and published a children's book, "Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team."

We have learned that while we may be apart physically, we are together in spirit and community. We are resilient and stronger than we have ever been. You, our dedicated OFP community, joined forces with us to make sure we would still be here. You helped us empower our clients, some of the most vulnerable members of our community. You allowed us to be there to ease isolation and anxiety and provide support, while maintaining social distancing and adhering to COVID guidelines.

We tell our clients, and we share this with everyone in our OFP community, that no challenge no matter how big or small will stop us, especially when we face it together. Even during a pandemic and the chaos in our world, we are focused on the good and lessons to be learned, together.

Founder's Letter (cont'd)

Our team is looking toward the horizon and putting one foot in front of the other, so we can make progress. Our pace may be slower, but it is deliberate. Remember, the turtle won the race!

COVID may have changed how many clients we served last year, but that doesn't mean there weren't daily triumphs! We welcomed 28 new clients and rescued 30 dogs. We continued to work with our 48 active clients, graduated 22 clients, and offered support to long-term clients. We have now worked with 440 clients, helped over 2,200 family members and rescued 377 dogs. And we hope to be there for many more clients in the future, thanks to you!

Together, we can continue to empower our amazing clients do the work they need to do to thrive and not be defined by their pain, but by who they are. Together, we can continue to save lives.

From all of our clients, families, and staff, I wish you all the best. Please stay safe, healthy, and blessed.

Mary Cortani Founder and Executive Director



We're the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce "2021 Nonprofit of the Year"!

On Tuesday December 29th, CEO and President of the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce, Mark Turner jumped on a Zoom call with the OFP team to surprise Mary Cortani with some exciting news! Mark announced that Operation Freedom Paws had been named the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce Spice of Life Awards "2021 Nonprofit of the Year." Mary was humbled and honored to know that OFP was able to serve our clients and community during a year like no other. What an amazing gift of affirmation after 2020, and a great source of motivation for the work we're now doing in 2021.

The Citizens and Business Awards Committee said they based their criteria on "a community nonprofit organization that has made a significant contribution to the overall health and livability of



Gilroy community.

Santa Clara County. The winning organization makes a significant impact that improves the economic, medical, educational or financial health of individuals in our community: impacts people through enabling and empowering individuals to improve their knowledge and skills toward greater quality of life, benefits the underserved, underrepresented or disaffected members of the community, including children, seniors and those in poverty and has high quality treatment of employees and members of the public."

We want to thank Mark Turner and the entire Gilroy Chamber of Commerce for this beautiful recognition and support. We know how many nonprofits are doing amazing work to help our community, its residents and local businesses during this challenging time and we applaud all of you. We are so proud to be a part of the

The Gilroy Chamber of Commerce "Spice of Life Awards" will be held virtually on March 25th. We look forward to being a part of the celebration.

Apollo and Chau

Apollo My Best Friend

You're My Sunshine, My Only Sunshine, You Make Me Happy When Skies Are Gray

In Greek mythology, Apollo is the Greek God of the sun and light, healing and diseases, and protection of the young. He was known to help ward off evil and was the patron of foreigners and the protector of refugees. I understand that Apollo may just be a name for my service dog, but after the journey I shared with him last year, I think it may have been fate for the two of us to be paired. Operation Freedom Paws saved my life by allowing me the honor and privilege of becoming a team with Apollo. I think the best way I can describe how much a service dog has helped my life is by sharing my life experiences before and after pairing up with Apollo.

I will start at the beginning. I was born in Viet Nam and came to America when I was only two years old. This was the land of opportunity and I was taught that if I wanted to achieve the American Dream, I would have to work hard. So that's what I did. I worked tirelessly for most of my youth, doing the best I could in school. My family were poor immigrants and education would be my means to



helping us get out of poverty. My parents were very strict, but as I have gotten older, I've realized there is a thin line between strict and abusive. My parents had ridiculously high expectations and standards, but I wanted to be a good son and make them happy. There was a lot of pressure on me as a child to succeed and there were many times when I just wanted to be a kid. I wanted to have fun and enjoy life instead of having to work on whatever homework assignment was given to me. But I knew that if I didn't excel in school, then I couldn't help my family out; so, I achieved, and

achieved, and achieved. I had my first job as a tutor in 8th grade and graduated middle school with honors. I took my second job in my senior year of high school and graduated again with honors before I finally made it into college at UC San Diego.

When I got to college, I already felt so burned out from my earlier years that it was hard to maintain that academic drive. In addition, I had finally moved away from home, away from my strict parents. Therefore, I did what any teenager would normally do; I rebelled. I was finally in an environment where I could do what I want, when I want, and be who I wanted to be without my overbearing parents always influencing my decisions. Unfortunately, that freedom took its toll and my grades suffered greatly. In addition, my health took a turn for the worse when I got into a sports accident and had to get reconstructive knee surgery. I was afraid I would end up failing out of school and disappointing my family and all the hopes they had for me. But I ended up persevering and was able to graduate with a degree. However, the cost of education had left me in a considerable amount of debt. Education was supposed to help pull my family out of poverty, not throw us deeper into it.

After getting my degree, I found it difficult to find employment because my resume was severely lacking. I had spent too much time in college having fun and not enough time building work experience. Time was running out before I had to start paying back my college loans. As a result, I decided to enlist in the U.S. Army. This decision wasn't completely out of the blue. My father was a Second Lieutenant in the South Vietnamese Army and he had fought alongside the Americans during the Viet Nam War. I remember as a child seeing him in uniform or watching war movies with him. A part of me always wanted to be in the military growing up, but the stereotypical Asian careers are doctor, lawyer, or engineer. In addition, I felt that the Army's discipline could help put my life back on track after my poor college performance. Most importantly, I wanted to show that this country made the right decision by allowing my family to

Apollo and Chau

Apollo My Best Friend (cont'd)

come here. I wanted to serve this great nation as repayment for all the opportunities the United States had given me. I wanted to earn the privilege of being an American.

I shipped off to Basic Combat Training in March of 2013. By August of 2013, I had become a Distinguished Honor Graduate after completing Advance Individual Training. I was so confident and happy because I was able to bring back the person that I was before college. I had goals of working hard, getting promoted, and eventually becoming an Officer. I wanted to use my skills and knowledge to help Soldiers. I was a "high-speed, low drag" type of Soldier; Hooah from Reveille till Retreat.

I was sent to an Apache Helicopter unit in September of 2013 and that unit is where I would stay until I got out in April of 2018. It was during these years that I got to see and experience some of the best and worse times of my life. I saw good and evil. I saw how exciting and tragic the military lifestyle could be. I experienced bonds stronger than I had with my own family. But I also experienced discrimination and racism. I created lifelong friendships, but watched some of my closest friends pass away. I got to see the beauty of a helicopter at night in the middle of a desert as it creates a bright halo of sand. But then I witnessed the sadness of a family finding out they had lost a loved one to suicide. I hated and loved every minute of the military life.

It was during this time that I had suffered a training accident and would have to have a second knee surgery. I had to learn how to walk again, for the second time in my life. I remember the doctor telling me that the greatest pain I would have to endure during recovery wouldn't be physical, but mental. I would have to accept that I wouldn't be able to become an Officer. I would have to accept that my physical limitations would prevent me from continuing my Active-Duty service. He was right. It did hurt knowing that I couldn't live up to my full potential in the Army.

When I got out in 2018, I immediately moved to Florida to live with my brother. He had just

started a business and he needed some extra help with his two children, my niece and nephew. I was delighted because Florida gave me the environment I needed to unwind from my years of military service. I was also happy to be an Uncle, to babysit my niece and nephew, and to spend time with family after being away for so long. Before I lived with them, my niece and nephew only knew me as a photo on the wall. But after spending time with them, I became the fun Uncle. It was during this time that I started to experience the side effects of military service.



I was already receiving treatment through the VA due to my physical injury, but I didn't expect the other issues that had started to manifest themselves. Sometimes events happen so quickly in the military that your mind doesn't have time to process it, and your body just moves from muscle memory. But when you do have time to process it, all these memories start rushing back. I was diagnosed with PTSD as a result of everything I had gone through in the Army. I remember being at a restaurant and just being constantly uneasy. I kept checking over my shoulder, looking at the exits to see who was coming in and who was going out. Eventually I had to leave in the middle of dinner because I just couldn't stand being inside anymore. I needed some fresh air. I sought counseling and therapy, was given medication, but it wasn't working. The medication made me feel inhuman. The therapy helped, but your therapist isn't there with you all the time. When you talk to your therapist, it's usually after a situation happened.

I eventually moved back to California in the summer of 2019 to help my parents as they were getting older in age. As much as I was helping my parents, I needed to help myself to deal with my

Apollo and Chau

Apollo My Best Friend (cont'd)

disabilities. It was also during this time that I did research into service dogs for veterans. I was able to find Operation Freedom Paws, and there was a glimpse of hope. I applied to their program and would find out the following year that I was accepted. It would be March of 2020 when I would begin my journey with Operation Freedom Paws and my service dog Apollo.

I first entered the program at the end of March in 2020 when the pandemic first began and lock-downs were starting to happen. The timing was perfect because I don't know how I would have survived 2020 if it wasn't for this program and my service dog. When I first met Apollo, my first thought was, "Oh my God, that fur is going to get everywhere." However, that thought was quickly replaced with joy because I finally had a dog. It was a childhood dream come true. All I wanted to do was love him, and pet him, and spoil him with all of my heart. But that's not how this program works. The dog is the easy part as Mary says. It only took a couple of weeks before Apollo made his first significant impact in my life.

In April 2020 my company decided to lay me off due to the pandemic, on my birthday. I immediately wanted to go buy a bottle of Jack Daniels and drown myself in my sorrows. It had worked for me in



the Army; surely it would work for me now. But instead, I drove myself straight to OFP and spent time with Apollo. He didn't care if I had a job or not; he was just happy to see me. I realized that Apollo would love me unconditionally, something that I wasn't familiar with growing up in an Asian household. He didn't care what my achievements were, how good I was at my job, or what was on my resume. Apollo didn't have expectations that I needed to meet. He loves me for who I am, and he cares about me and wants to make sure I am

okay. He could tell if I was having a good or bad day regardless of what I told everyone else. He has ratted me out many times during training at OFP. Only because Apollo cared and continues to care about my well-being.

There was a time that I felt resentful towards the Army for making me feel as if I was a broken person, but it was thanks to working with Apollo that I was able to start slowly putting together the pieces of my life. I remember being so frustrated because he just wouldn't listen to my commands. But the problem wasn't with him, it was with me. I wasn't listening to myself, to what my body and mind were telling me. I had been trained to work through the pain, to power through whatever life throws at you and just get it on with. But Apollo, and many of the mentor-trainers at OFP, were telling me to slow down. I was being disobedient, not my dog.

As the training continued, and I developed more trust with Apollo, I started to heal the other issues that I was dealing with in my life. It's amazing how you can apply what you learn while training with your service dog to other aspects of your life. Teaching Apollo about boundaries has helped me create boundaries in the relationships that I share with others. Learning how to calm Apollo down and getting him to settle has helped me alleviate my anxiety in stressful situations. And watching Apollo just be silly and rolling on his back has made me realize that no matter how serious life may get, there is always some time for some belly rubs.

I have to admit that I probably wouldn't have survived 2020 if I had not been paired with my service dog. Apollo and Operation Freedom Paws saved my life. I would have made many poor decisions in order to cope with the pandemic. Instead, having Apollo in my life has helped me sleep better, lose weight, and build stronger relationships with those around me. Almost sounds like an informercial, but that's the reality of it. He changed my life for the better. As angry as I was at the Army for what happened to me, if it wasn't for those things occurring, I would have never met Apollo. He is the light in my life who has pulled me out of the darkness. Apollo is my best friend.

-We are very proud to announce that Apollo and Chau graduated on February 16th and Chau is now a new mentor trainer trainee at Operation Freedom Paws-

OFP Daycare and Boarding - What is Socialization? An Update from Renee, Director of Operations

When our day to day lives changed dramatically due to the Covid pandemic, there was an unprecedented rise in shelter pet adoptions. That ray of sunshine during a dark time was a wonderful opportunity for homeless dogs in need to find loving homes. And as we humans sheltered in place, many of us did so with our new and longtime four-footed friends by our sides. But little by little, we are seeing signs of our world opening up and the idea of transitioning back into society probably makes some of us nervous. Now, imagine how our dogs feel. Especially those dogs who were adopted during the pandemic and went straight from shelter life to sheltering in place. They too need to get comfortable again with the world outside. That's where socialization and exposure training can be a dog's best friend.

When we think about dog socialization, many of us probably picture our dogs playing well with other dogs. But socialization is so much more. It's our dogs becoming comfortable with many things; adults, kids, animals, movement, noises and routine sounds like the neighborhood garbage truck. Socialization is also about how our dogs handle trips to the vet, walks, car rides, human touch and grooming. It's not about our dogs playing in a group at the dog park or letting strangers pet them. In essence, true socialization is about getting our dogs accustomed to and comfortable with the world









We here at Operations Freedom Paws Daycare and Boarding have worked with many dogs we refer to as Covid dogs. No, they don't have Covid, but they do have anxiety and a lack confidence resulting from our need to quarantine during the pandemic. Our techs work on socialization and exposure training with these dogs while they're in our care for scheduled visits. We engage our kennel guests in a calm, slow manner to help them become comfortable with strangers, sounds, traffic noises, other dogs, and being out in the open. This exposure is not forced nor overwhelming. It's gradual and reassuring desensitization. Along with our socialization processes, we focus on a dog's mental and physical well-being by teaching them basic obedience commands, providing exercise multiple times a day and caring for them in a structured, loving and safe environment.

Here are a few kennel techniques we can all use at home to work on socialization with our furry babies. Take them on short walks. You not only let them experience the sights, sounds and smells around your neighborhood, but you both get exercise! Teach them to heal. This provides dogs with mental stimulation and is a great leash skill. We can teach our dogs the "watch me" command or play a game of find-it, where the reward is dinner. These practices help our dogs turn on their superpowers with their noses! Did you know our dogs can smell separately out of each nostril? They can also breathe in and out at the same time! Pretty nifty trick right? And there's no training required; it's all instinctual.

Our dogs have offered us amazing comfort throughout the Covid crisis, and every day, they improve the quality of our lives. Socialization and exposure training is one of the ways we can give our dogs comfort and improve the quality of their daily lives. So hopefully we can all get ready to enjoy some adventures beyond our backyards in 2021.

Giving Tuesday & End of Year Giving

You Made the Difference!

A BIG THANK YOU to everyone who participated in our "Giving Tuesday" and "End of Year Giving" initiatives on our OFP platform. You have truly shown us the power of community and whether it's in person or online, community lives where you are.

We hope you and your family were able to join us for a beautiful storytelling session of Mary Cortani and Connor's Quinn new children's book, "Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team." We were thrilled to have actor, author and singer, Jane Lynch, lend her time and talents to our fundraising efforts. Jane did a beautiful job of bringing the pages of the the book to life and driving more awareness to our mission; thank you Jane!

Mary Cortani, OFP Founder and Executive Director, shared in a video her personal end of the year message to the OFP community. Mary reflected on our mission, the new challenges our clients face and the deep gratitude she has for our supporters, especially during these tough emotional and financial times. As Mary says, "this will pass, the sun will come out, and we will get through this together."

OFP was also honored to preview for you a powerful work in progress for the feature-length documentary "DOG WALK HOME", from talented filmmakers Vicki Topaz and Wynn Padula. "DOG WALK HOME" tells the story of a journey and return, of families guided away from the pitfalls of PTSD to a budding sense of hope and finding a "new normal." We want to thank the filmmakers and our veteran clients, Ramon, Emilio, Kim and their families for bravely sharing their voices in service to other veterans that are marginalized by PTSD.







Whether you participated on our OFP platform, Facebook, or website, created your own fund-raiser or bought calendars and books, you made the difference! Your donations were instrumental in helping us continue to provide our 48-week training program, mental health services, meals, gas cards, temporary housing, training equipment, and veterinarian visits for service dogs at no cost to our clients. You made it possible for us to install much needed outdoor lighting at OFP to help facilitate evening classes. It's because of our OFP community that during our "End of Year Giving" we were able to hit our \$20,000 goal to receive our angel donor's \$15,000 gift and an additional \$5,000 to receive a \$5,000 dollar match!

You made a visible impact on the invisible wounds of anxiety, depression, trauma and isolation. You helped to create mobility and freedom where there was just pain. You empowered our amazing clients to continue to do the work and heal. THANK YOU!

If you're fortunate enough to be in a position to give in 2021, we hope you'll consider becoming a member of the OFP Monthly Giving Community. As monthly donors, you champion a sustainable source of giving that helps us bridge our larger funding efforts, better serve our clients, and save more lives. Let's amplify the good we can do TOGETHER!



The Real Impact for OFP Graduates

In November, "Military Times" reported that we're losing 20 veterans a day to suicide. The crushing mental and physical stressors of COVID-19 have made the need to serve our veterans and their families even greater.

We've been honored to provide our clients with the resources, support, mentorship and mental health services they need at such a critical time.

We know there were days that our clients took two steps back for every one step forward. But that doesn't mean there wasn't progress being made. Clients were gaining the coping skills and the community to navigate their healing journey, even during a pandemic.



A New Partnership for Healing: Operation Freedom Paws and Stella Center

Founder and Executive Director, Mary Cortani, is excited to announce our new partnership with the Stella Center. Operation Freedom Paws will now be able to offer our clients suffering with PTSD another healing modality, the Stellate Ganglion Block (SGB).

Dr. Lipov, Chief Medical Officer of Stella, has been credited with modifying the 100 year old Stellate Ganglion Block (SGB) to alleviate PTSD symptoms during a single outpatient procedure. Stella's unique dual SGB injection has shown 80% effectiveness in relieving symptoms of PTSD.

"Dr. Lipov discovered and perfected a modern treatment for PTSD. He is one of the world's renowned innovators in anesthesiology. He understands how my patients hurt and he has helped them heal." - Dr. Frank Ochberg, Founding Father of Trauma Science, and the Doctor who distinguished Stockholm Syndrome and Post Traumatic Stress Injury.

We are looking forward to offering this treatment to our clients who are good candidates and helping them to advance along their healing journey.



