

OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS



O P E R A T I O N F R E E D O M P A W S I N 2 0 2 1



A LETTER FROM OUR FOUNDER: MAY WE DARE TO DREAM

Wow! What a year 2021 has been, with many ups and downs, twists and turns. We were not sure if we would be able to hold events, other than virtually. Yet by some miracle, we did hold our golf tournament, and celebrate in person and virtually our 10th anniversary as a nonprofit together. It has been such a journey. We have continued to graduate and add clients. We have continued to pull dogs from rescues and shelters who have the right stuff to become service dogs. And it's all because of you, our donors, volunteers and supporters, that we are here helping our 472nd client and their family. We still face challenges going forward as the world is in a state of chaos. But we know and believe we will get through this together. We believe in our mission and you. Our wish to you and yours this holiday season is one of blessings. May your hearts find peace and may you find and believe in a better tomorrow than today. May we all overcome the challenges of Covid and a society divided and reach out a hand to help folks when they feel no one cares. May we be kind and gentle with each other. May we dare to dream and believe it will come true. May we all find our superpowers.

With the holidays here, many of us will celebrate with our families and friends, and reflect on the year behind us and look to the year ahead. During this time, we ask that you also consider our clients in your end of year charitable giving.

With your donation to Operation Freedom Paws, we can accomplish our mission and purpose to make the lives of our veterans, first responders, kids and other individuals with disabilities, and their families, better. Together, we can make a difference in both two-legged and four-legged lives that place their trust in us for a better tomorrow. No gift is too small, and your contribution can give our clients an opportunity not just to survive, but to thrive.

We invite you to join us on this journey, now and throughout this giving season and in the future. Your involvement can and does make the greatest difference.

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

Todd and His Service Dog Ivy

A Spouse's Story

Trauma and healing affect not only our clients but their families. For the first time, we are sharing a partner's perspective. Michelle is married to our client, Todd, a veteran and retired firefighter. Here she speaks to his healing, through her eyes.

Following the pairing of my husband, Todd, with a service dog named Ivy, I have witnessed changes in him that could be described as, "lifesaving," "miraculous," and "incredible." But these words do not express the magnitude of what has truly happened. For that, you have to see it in real life. It's like when you've seen the most glorious sunset, and you think to yourself, "This is so beautiful, it could not have happened by chance; something greater, something divine had to create this." You snap a photo, thinking you can capture the beauty in the moment, but something is lost in the copy. Nothing can compare to the original. I think that this is how this article will be; it's a decent description but cannot do justice to seeing the real thing.

I have been married to Todd for 25 years. We have known each other a good portion of our lives, having first dated in high school. We have had good times and hard times in our marriage. He was a firefighter/paramedic and retired almost two years ago. We have a 24-year-old daughter. I continue to work full-time in public service.

As a young person, Todd was a light-hearted jokester, with a fairly happy, easy-going personality. Whereas I have always been a bit more serious, the responsible type, a rule follower. I watched him move through the years and change in a number of ways - taking on more responsibility at work, getting intimately involved in others' grief and pain and wanting to make things better for other people. Todd was making jokes to break the tension or taking on a task no one else would want to do, because it was too emotionally difficult. He seemed happy to do it. It made him feel useful; it seemed like it was a calling. He was making a difference and he was receiving recognition and accolades for it.

Todd put work ahead of me and our daughter much of the time, as someone needed him more than we did or so he thought. This created animosity in the relationship, but we brushed it under the rug. I would think, "Am I being selfish? Can I ask for more? Can I ask him to give this up? Isn't this what people do, sacrifice for others? What about duty? Maybe it is my duty to carry on when he is off helping someone else. Our daughter will understand; she can see how important his work is. I can fill the gap. I will be here for both of us."

So, you can see this wasn't the healthiest environment for our family, but this is what we did. It began to take a toll on our family that I don't think either of us was wanting to deal with. At some point, whether you are ready or not, something has to give. There were small changes along the way. Looking back now, I can see it so much clearer. I found myself appalled at the way he would talk to others on the phone when something was not going his way. It was out of character, and I even remember saying to our daughter who would sometimes hear it, "Your dad didn't use to talk to people that way. I don't know what is wrong with him." He would become unreasonably harsh or angry, there was no patience for any inconvenience, everything became a personal affront. This was not the man I grew up with and married. Something was different. When asked if anything was wrong or bothering him, the answer was generally the same, "I am not mad; I am good."

I was unaware at the time that those are signs of post-traumatic stress. He had no insight to the changes that were happening and was in denial that he was anything but happy, even when his behavior showed otherwise. He didn't really believe in mental health as a "real" thing, which made it even more difficult when he started having panic attacks in the grocery store and sleeping all day with no desire to go anywhere or do anything. Denial is very powerful.



Todd and His Service Dog Ivy

A Spouse's Story (cont'd)

Being the wife does not give you any superpowers. In fact, many times it feels like you have no credibility at all when it comes to expressing your concerns to your spouse. Things became increasingly unhealthy and despite efforts made to participate in therapeutic programming related to PTSD, there did not seem to be a good fit until Todd was in a program called the Mighty Oaks. That's where he met up with a first responder, Eric, who had seen first-hand how service dogs could be helpful. Eric vowed to help him find an organization that would pair him up with a dog.

By this time, my husband was dangling by a thread emotionally. This was literally a life and death situation. We had separated, and I had finally decided I was filing for divorce, as I could not see a way forward with the way things had progressed. I still loved my husband, but I felt I was causing more harm than good. It just so happened at this same time that my husband let me know that an organization called Operation



Freedom Paws was willing to interview him and potentially have him participate in their program to work with a service dog. The program was run by people who could help him work through challenges created by post-traumatic stress and he would work with and train a service dog to assist him.

I thought that was great and told him I would support him in his journey but had no plans to interrupt the divorce process, as I wanted to make sure he was not doing this to “save the marriage.” I wanted this to be a decision he made only to help himself get well. He had spoken to Mary Cortani at Operation Freedom Paws and let her know our history and circumstances. This was the very first time Todd willingly, without doing it for someone else, wanted to participate in a program and had hope for a better future. Even though he told Mary we were getting divorced, she asked him if she and I could talk, so I could understand what the program entailed and to get some background information.

I agreed and when I spoke to Mary, I found her to be a genuine, caring, person who was willing to hear all of the story, the good, the bad and the ugly. She was non-judgmental, she believed in the process, she believed in my husband, and she was real. She asked me if I could come out and see how the program worked and to meet her, a counselor, and Ivy in person. I received text messages and phone calls from Mary, who was checking in with me. Usually, as the spouse of the person who is the “participant,” you are left out, your issues don't matter, only the target person matters, not the rest of the family. So, this was different; it was helpful to be included and supported.

Seeing Todd with his dog, Ivy, was the beautiful sunset moment I was describing earlier. There was actual joy in his face, which I had not seen in many years. He had a sense of purpose, he was gaining confidence, he was receiving unconditional love from Ivy, and he was learning about his feelings through Ivy. It was like the switch had finally been flipped.

There are a handful of times in my life where I would say divine intervention was at play. This is one of those times. The right people at the right time were put in front of us. I cannot repay what we have gained. I cannot do justice to what Operation Freedom Paws has done to give us another chance in life together as a family. I am grateful every day for Mary, as she looks after my husband and consistently checks in and encourages me as well. She has a beautiful soul and every person I have encountered at OFP has treated us with respect and kindness. I have since put the divorce on hold and we recently had a family vacation with our daughter for the first time in over 4 years. We are hopeful for our future, which I firmly believe was given to us through a service dog named Ivy and a phenomenal woman who leads an incredible group of staff in changing lives and healing people.

Operation Freedom Paws - Petco Love

OFPP Is A Winner In The Petco Love Stories Campaign!

"In Greek mythology, Apollo is the Greek god of sun and light. In the case of my service dog, Apollo, he is the light that helped pull me out of the darkness."

These are a few of the powerful words our veteran client, Chau, shared in the service dog story he submitted to Petco Love Stories. Out of thousands of submissions from across the nation, Chau's story was selected as one of the 100 winners!

On Saturday December 4th, with Chau and Apollo in attendance, Mary was presented with a check for \$5,000 by Petco Regional Field Program Manager, John Sierra, to support OFP's work with our service dog teams. Chau was treated to a goodie bag including new shoes compliments of Bobs from Sketchers and a Petco shopping spree for Apollo.

We could not be prouder of Chau and his desire to bring awareness and funds to our mission and help his fellow veterans with disabilities begin to heal. "Our clients bless our lives every day. It's beyond humbling when a client like Chau takes it upon himself to give back to the program. We are honored. This gift will help us to rescue a shelter dog, match them with a disabled client, and create a lifeline that saves two lives," shared Mary Cortani.

Thank you to Petco Morgan Hill General Manager, Kayla Boehmer, and her team for hosting us. We are grateful to receive this gift and share our mission on this highly respected national platform. We extend our deepest gratitude for your advocacy, Chau.



A Very "Mary" Christmas

Mary Cortani - Grand Marshall of the Gilroy Holiday Parade

Thank you to the Gilroy Downtown Business Association and its organizers for honoring Mary Cortani as The Grand Marshall of The Gilroy Holiday Parade. 2021 marks a decade of Mary's incredible nonprofit service to the community, reigniting hope, healing families, and saving hundreds of lives.

Everyone loved seeing Mary, Santa and Mrs. Claus riding in an open sleigh down Monterey Road. It was great to watch the community come together in the spirit of the season. The night came to a magical close as Santa waved his hand and lit the downtown Christmas tree to the delight of kids both young and old.

A proud Gilroy resident for over 27 years, it's been Mary's honor to serve her community and country. When asked by the Gilroy Downtown Business Association to share her holiday wish, Mary said, "I wish for a healthy, happy and prosperous 2022 that unites us. And for everyone to keep a little bit of the holiday spirit alive all year, dare to dream, and believe it can come true."



Event Fundraising Highlights

We Love Our OFP Community!

AUGUST - THE OFP 10TH ANNUAL GOLF TOURNAMENT:

This was the first in-person fundraising event since early 2020! The “10th Annual Golf Tournament and Awards Luncheon” was held at Coyote Creek Golf Club in Morgan Hill. Golfers started with warm up on the practice range, then hit the beautiful Valley Course for a four-person scramble tournament. While on the course, golfers could participate in a roll of the dice or spin of the wheel to improve their standing. The tournament was followed by a delicious pasta brunch, drawing and a silent auction where winners went home with everything from BBQ smoker kits to professional golf apparel, thanks to our in-kind donors. Big congratulations to our 1st place winners, Team NECA. And thank you to our client, Jim, for sharing his journey with our supporters.



SEPTEMBER - OFP 10TH ANNUAL PAWS WITH PATRIOTS WINE GALA:

What a truly special night it was celebrating our 10-year nonprofit anniversary with our community in-person and via livestream, thanks to the Motivational Misfits. Those in attendance sipped wines donated from across the Santa Clara Valley and beyond, and savored a delicious tri-tip dinner from Old City Hall Restaurant. WheelHouse and the OFP ALLSTARS featuring the San Jose Sharks’ organist, Mikey Day provided great live music. Our amazing hosts, 94.5 Bay FM’s Jona-Denz Hamilton and Gilroy Chamber of Commerce President, Mark Turner, did a wonderful job keeping everyone engaged, including our most spirited and successful auction to date. Everyone in the room was moved when Mary spoke to OFP’s journey, and our clients James, Todd, and Mariela shared their inspiring stories. The understanding of our mission was further deepened by a special screening of a powerful trailer for the documentary in the making, “A Dog Walk Home,” by filmmakers Vicki Topaz and Wynn Padula, featuring three of OFP’s veteran clients. Attendees were treated to specially engraved 10 year wine glasses and challenge coins.



OCTOBER - THE 2021 EL CAMINO CLUB CHILI CHAMPIONS COOK-OFF TO BENEFIT OFP:

The competition really heated up at the “Chili Champions Cook-Off” hosted by the El Camino Club and event organizer, Chris Miceli. Held at Atelier Des Savants Fous in Gilroy, OFP supporters enjoyed delicious chili tasting flights from CAL FIRE, American Medical Response (AMR), Gilroy Fire Department, CHP and The Gilroy Grill. And who better to judge the contest than celebrated Gilroy Garlic Festival chefs, Gene Sakahara and Sam Bozzo of SakaBozzo?! Supporters rocked out to some great music from Steel Horse

Event Fundraising Highlights

We Love Our OFP Community! (cont'd)

while sipping amazing wines from La Vie Dansante and Sarah's Vineyards. Supporters also enjoyed a perfect BBQ to compliment the chili, thanks to Rosie's at the Beach and Old City Hall Restaurant. Congratulations went out to the winners for the "The Judge's Choice" award, Team Miceli and Steffany Miceli, and "The People's Choice" award going to Team Gilroy Grill and Dave Bozzo.



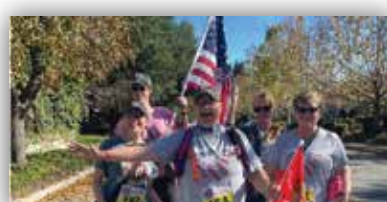
OCTOBER - THE 3RD ANNUAL CALIFORNIA BOWLING WRITERS TOURNAMENT TO BENEFIT OFP

The rain didn't stop California Bowling Writers (CBW) from hosting a great fundraising event at 4th Street Bowl in San Jose. OFP was honored for the third year in a row, as CBW members organized this tournament to benefit our clients and their service dogs. Whether people bowled to compete or just for fun, everyone had a great time and showed us amazing support. CBW members prepared delicious baked goods that were a big hit. Supporters also enjoyed participating in a drawing and getting a jump on their holiday shopping. Organizer Donna Morales, a longtime friend and supporter of Operation Freedom Paws, did a wonderful job putting together this great event. It went off seamlessly.



NOVEMBER - 6TH ANNUAL VETERANS DAY MORGAN HILL RUN

The weather and supporters showed up in a big way for the "6th Annual Morgan Hill Veterans Day Run" organized by Charles Weston and Lesley Miles. We're honored to be one of the beneficiaries of this annual event that benefits organizations supporting our veterans. There was such a spirit of community from the volunteers and runners/walkers to those who watched and cheered everyone on to the finish line. We loved seeing our OFP clients, staff, and supporters participate in the run/walk along with our partners at DreamPower Horsemanship. And what a great opportunity to spend the day with Blue Star Moms. We will never take for granted the power of community to transform lives together.



Thank you to everyone who participated and donated to OFP so far this year. Because of you, we have just welcomed our 472nd client into the program! Please help us to end the year strong. You can make a tax deductible donation on our "End of Year Giving Platform" at <https://ofpgiving2021.givesmart.com>. Thank you for continuing to be our partners in healing, and helping us to save two lives, one team at a time.

OFP Daycare and Boarding - A Look at our Kennel Techs

An Update from Renee, Director of Operations

Happy Holidays to everyone and best wishes for the New Year! 2021 has been an amazing, unique, different, exciting, and unprecedented year. Slowly but surely, things are returning to a “new normal”. We are thrilled that our two-footed and four-pawed daycare and boarding customers have been returning after much time away. We are forever grateful to those customers who were in a position to support us through COVID restrictions and limitations. Our team has been honored to be there for our customers who are frontline healthcare workers and first responders, working incredibly long shifts to protect us all. This year, we have welcomed many new customers into our family. In fact, OFP Daycare and Boarding was named a “2021 Neighborhood Favorite” by Nextdoor, and Operation Freedom Paws (OFP) the “2021 Nonprofit of the Year” by the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce!

Behind all the changes and triumphs is our amazing kennel technician team. OFP Daycare and Boarding is staffed 24/7/365. Our overnight staff care for our customer’s dogs staying at our center and any needs their dogs might have during the night, as well as prepare the facility for the next day. Our dedicated techs are there for our service dog clients should they have a crisis in the middle of the night and need to connect with OFP mentor-trainers or have a place to come and feel safe.

OFP kennel technicians are responsible for the basic training of the dogs rescued from shelters for the service dog training program. Our kennel techs are there from day one to welcome these dogs to our family and Canine Education Center, assist them in acclimating to their new environment, assess their individualized care and begin their introduction into our service dog training program.

When daycare and boarding furry customers arrive at our center, the kennel technicians not only care for, feed, play, walk, and love them, but they work on basic training and instill commands; hoping to send



them home with more obedience skills and schooling. It’s great to have a dog follow commands and feel comfortable staying at our kennel. The skills they learn help to keep their minds engaged and busy, which only enhances their stay with us. For many of our longtime furry friends, we are their home away from home.

One glimpse into the day of a kennel technician and you’ll see the incredible care and training they provide the dogs in our service dog program and our daycare and boarding facility. Their responsibilities include feeding the dogs three meals a day, administering medication, assisting dogs with physical disabilities, walking up to thirteen (yup! thirteen!) miles a shift, being on continuous alert, potty training, diaper changing, walking and playing with dogs up to 150 pounds rain or shine, handling Police K9’s, grooming, baths, helping ease separation anxiety or fear/aggression, assessing and controlling small playgroups, taking pictures for social media, and cleaning the entire facility on a daily basis while assisting customers and service dog clients. Whew!

So the next time you see one of our kennel technicians, please thank them for their devotion and sacrifices to serve our mission, as well as working tirelessly to provide round-the-clock loving, safe care to our furry residents with an unwavering dedication to excellence.

Thank you to EVERYONE for your continued support of Operation Freedom Paws and our Daycare and Boarding facility!

OFP 2022 Events Calendar:

When You Participate, You Make a Difference!

Our team loves the opportunity to spend time with our community. We've got some great fundraising events planned for 2022. Remember, your participation makes a profound difference in the lives of our clients, their families, and the service dogs by their sides. Proceeds from our 2022 events will go directly to work for our service dog teams. We hope you'll join us!

SAVE THE DATES!

Your Attendance Empowers our Mission!

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>February 5, 2022</u> OFP Crab Feed Old City Hall Restaurant Gilroy, CA</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>May 21, 2022</u> El Camino Club Chili Champions Cook-Off Atelier Des Savant Fous Gilroy, CA</p>		
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>March 5, 2022</u> OFP Pasta Feed Old City Hall Restaurant Gilroy, CA</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>June 3, 2022</u> OFP 11th Annual Golf Tournament Coyote Creek Golf Course Morgan Hill, CA</p>		
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>April 16, 2022</u> OFP Community Easter Egg Hunt OFP Canine Education Center San Martin, CA</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>August 6, 2022</u> OFP 11th Annual "Paws with Patriots" Wine Gala OFP Canine Education Center Gilroy, CA</p>		



The 2022 OFP Calendar is here:

Get Your Copy Today!

Can you believe it's almost 2022?! The calendar features OFP Certified Service Dog Teams who have graduated and now have the skills to turn their daily challenges into training opportunities, and with time, into daily triumphs.

The calendar is on sale now for \$20.00. Proceeds will go directly towards our mission. You can purchase the calendars online at www.yearbox.com/ofp, or if you're local, come by the Canine Education Center and pick one up in person.

Special thanks to Pete Johnston of Yearbox Calendars and Army Veteran, Ray Barcomb, for their work on the design layout and printing of the calendars.

