



# Operation Freedom Paws

*Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team*

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## Operation Freedom Paws

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[operationfreedompaws.org](http://operationfreedompaws.org)



*"Everything, every day is a training opportunity."*

*--Mary Cortani*

## Founder's Message

Memorial Day is a time to reflect upon all who served our nation. Some gave all, but all gave some. The military does not prepare anyone to leave the service. Most young veterans return to civilian life with loss. In separating from the service, they lose their foundation: three squares a day, a roof over their heads, a paycheck, and their "in-service family". Add the trauma of events such as loss of buddies, taking an enemy's life, a brain injury, military sexual trauma, loss of limbs and hearing. Add loss of a mission and purpose in life. Add loss of medical care for a spouse and children. Getting out means losing almost everything, and struggling for survival--for the most basic needs. Is it really a mystery why they experience Post-Traumatic Stress?



When putting together Operation Freedom Paws we thought, "Well, let's give them a new mission, let's teach them to train their own service dogs.", but it evolved beyond that. We now take a more holistic approach. OFP has become about teaching new forms of communication, community, and camaraderie that aren't based on shared military experiences. We don't just work with the veteran; we involve family members---the veteran's 24/7 support system. Beyond signing up for the new mission, we ask vets to set at least one long-term goal. We re-connect them with spouses and children by helping them to communicate. We are not just providing the dog as a different type of medication to treat the symptoms. Instead, we are offering them tools to design and build their new foundation.

To help create that new foundation, we need to make sure clients know we "have their six" by being available 24/7. Taking that phone call when no one else will builds a sense of trust. We have 1:1 discussions; we provide therapists, clinicians, and group sessions for clients and spouses. We take classes to restaurants, malls and grocery stores. We offer family dog camps and barbecues. We encourage interactions between clients to help them regain a sense of community. Some clients call us their "OFP Family", and that term means more to us because they chose it.

We now have 117 applications and 67 active clients. Our cost averages \$15,000 per team from start to finish. The struggle for funding is a daily battle. All non-profits

## Upcoming Events:

*Paws with Patriots  
Wine Gala*

*August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

*Hoof & Woof  
Poker Run*

*October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015*



compete for the same small pool of funds--- and how can you compete with another person's passion to benefit their community? OFP was founded because of my passion to help veterans survive, but it became greater than that. We offer hope, courage and skills to help clients believe they can build their own foundation. We make sure every dollar donated has a significant impact on the program. We need donations to help the leased OFP Canine Education Center become a permanent home, because the needs of our veterans are not going away; they're growing exponentially.

We are grateful to our monthly donors, and to the supporters who attend our events. Please talk about OFP with friends and family. Only you can explain why you like our organization, but if you want the story of a real person whose life has been profoundly impacted by OFP, please read the interview with Bobby in this newsletter. There is no greater testament to the success of this program. Bobby is now a mentor-trainer, giving back to his fellow veterans, rebuilding his foundation.

--Mary Cortani  
Founder and President

## The Jefferson Award



Mary Cortani was one of six KSBW Central Coast Jefferson Award Honorees. The Jefferson Award is presented to those who go well beyond their expected duties to impact their local community. By establishing Operation Freedom Paws, Mary has built a platform to help veterans and others in the community.

Mary will attend the national ceremonies in Washington, D.C. with over 80 representatives from across the country, where five national honorees will be selected this June.

## Meet Bobby & Princess

Bobby is a Vietnam War Army Veteran and Princess is a career change dog from Guide Dogs of the Desert. Together they are one of OFP's certified service dog teams, and a shining example of what this program can help clients accomplish. Bobby has been with the program for over three years. After he certified, he continued (as many do) to come back with their dog for the classes and camaraderie. Bobby, with the help of Princess, is now a Mentor Trainer, leading classes and helping others survive and thrive.



## Awards

2015 KSBW  
Central Coast  
Jefferson Award

2015 Golden Rule  
Award

2014 Coretta Scott  
King Award

2012 CNN Top  
Ten Hero

2011 Napa County  
Red Cross Hero

## Commendation / Proclamations

2013 Santa Clara  
County Board of  
Supervisors

2013 Gilroy  
Chamber of  
Commerce Good  
Egg Award

2012 City of Gilroy



Here is Bobby's story in his own words:

"I was brought up in a Hispanic family, I was taught certain ways of life and the men were exonerated from doing things as males do. Women were meant to stay at home and the men to work. We were sheltered until we were in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. We were allowed to walk to school. In high school I got my freedom and I played football the first year, but then I ended up in a bad group and I became influenced by them; I drank, I did marijuana, I did things that I shouldn't have done and [there were] girls I misused.

I went into the military because of what I was doing to my parents. I saw in them and their faces that I was doing wrong, so I joined the military for two years and I left because I was disappointing them. I thought it would make me be a better person and I wanted to be a better person that is why I joined. I knew I would be educated and there would be death and all that stuff and that was ok. And I knew that if I had to, it was going to be them before me, and I knew that. I went through basic training and I saw the misuse of humanity in people---that is when my heart kind of got in the way.

There was mistreatment of people who should have never been in the service, because when put in a situation they couldn't do something, and I stood up for them. I would get in trouble with the person that couldn't do it because of it, but I thought 'it's ok, it's no big deal'. I continued on and I ended up becoming a favorite of the Sergeant and that was good. Other guys thought I was a 'kiss-ass' but that was fine with me.

Then something happened and it made me confused and angry. I distanced myself from everybody and I slept where the powder keg and ammo was and I would always carry my ammo with me to protect myself. I would do foolish things, like charge the perimeter when we were under fire, I would hear whistling bullets coming by my head, and I didn't care if I died or not. I didn't care about myself anymore.

I made a friend by it because I dove in headfirst, into some water with some engineer stakes and barbed wire and unknowingly provoked him to jump in. I had gotten out and he jumped in feet first off of a rope and he hurt himself and he called 'Bobby, Bobby' and I took my clothes off and dove in. I nearly lost my life, because by the time I got there he took me under and held me down. So I found some humanity in myself and I had a bodyguard the rest of my time there, and I found a friend. I could trust again, but I still didn't care about my life. He ended up saving me



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because I would take off to the perimeter and I would just stand on top of the hill and shoot from there. I just stood there angry and mad at the world, doing stupid stuff like that.

[When I returned home] my family could not understand what was going on with me because they didn't know what I went through. When I came back I was flaring and screaming and yelling in my sleep, and my parents would come in and try to wake me from a distance and they would turn the light on and I would wake up and I would tell them to not touch me, begging, 'Please do not touch me.' They would tell me what I was doing and I just would tell them 'Please don't touch me I don't want to hurt you.'

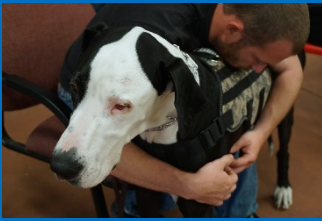
So for 45 years I hated the government and people. I knew something was wrong with me because of the way I felt; I felt different. I didn't know that I was battling depression, anxiety, fear, mood swings, and suicidal thoughts. I told the government that I needed help and they just gave me a check and said, 'Ok here this should solve your problems.' They labeled me with Post Traumatic Stress, and I was like 'What the hell is that?', and I tried to do this and that to solve the problem all on my own. Something was wrong with me and I couldn't figure out what it was, so I got into the Word and kept reading and asking 'Ok, Lord I am trying to find you, but where are you?' I believe that God sent me here [to OFP] for a reason, and Mary gave me the space and the opportunity. I believe that when Jeremiah

(previous OFP mentor-trainer) spoke to me, and I don't know why his name was biblical, and he opened his heart and said 'what is wrong with you?' and I don't know why, but I believe the Man Upstairs said 'talk to him'. He had a soft heart and I just talked and I just opened up to him. In my head I said, 'I want to be like him.'

It was three years later and when I was speaking to Martha [an OFP consulting therapist] and she said, 'Remember

when you said you [wanted to be like Jeremiah] and it came true?' And I realized 'God, you are real' and ever since then, a little time later, it was like the weight that I had been feeling was gone. I am now able to speak, I am able to talk with people, and things have been happening in my life that I cannot deny. I feel so much different and it's like I want to scream and tell everyone how overwhelmed with joy I am. I give [OFP] a lot of credit for being here, and I am just trying to give back. I feel a lot of love, compassion and I want to be there for the guys and ladies who are here, because I know what it's like to be lost, and the pain they are in, both physical and emotional. This place, I believe it is here for a purpose and Mary is genuine, she can be rough on the edges sometimes, but that's what it takes sometimes. This is a place I can come, I can read my Bible and eat my dinner with my dog. [OFP] gives people hope."





**What does Princess do for you now?** She is a part of my life, she fills the spaces that I have in my life. She is a part of me, [OFFP] is part of my life. It is like my home. I have a space to be myself and be free. This is a place where I can help [clients] with their battles.

**What would you say to those just entering the program?** Give it a chance, open your heart and your mind, because if you truly want change you have to open your mind and your heart. Follow the rules and try to do it, you will win, you honestly will. I came out here because I had tried everything and I thought maybe this was going to work, it was just another avenue that God led me to, but I began to question if this was the right avenue for me. I then was thinking I was having fun because I brought my own dog that I raised from a pup and then Mary said it was not working out. I began to realize, 'Ok, the dog is making me anxious, he is sick, I am not going to afford all the medical bills and I better listen to Mary.' I finally gave in and I got Princess, I didn't like her initially and she wasn't mine, I didn't raise her and I thought, 'Man, I don't like this dog.' I initially fought it, but I stayed with it and now I love this dog. It wasn't love at first sight, because I was never an animal lover, so it was hard for me to accept. Princess amazes me every day and I get to run and tell my mother about it and then I get to show her [what Princess can do]. I don't get lonely anymore, it is amazing. My life is so different, it is really great! And doing what I am doing now [being a mentor trainer], it is a real blessing for me. I make mistakes, my tongue gets swollen or whatever it does, because I get confused but that is ok because I am learning. My mind is getting clearer and clearer every day, it is amazing.





## Spring has Sprung!

Spring has sprung us right into our event season for both OFP and third-party fundraising events:

### OFP Easter Egg Hunt:

Our First Annual Easter Egg Hunt was an amazing community event! A surprising number of people came out to learn about or show support for OFP, and kids of all ages participated in egg hunts. We had guest appearances by both Mr. and Mrs. Easter Bunny, as well as face-painting and a bake-sale of delicious goodies provided by volunteers, clients and their families. This event, which was planned to raise community awareness, also became a solid fundraiser to kick off our event year. Thank you to all who volunteered, donated and came out to join in the festivities. We look forward to next year!



### “A Table Affair 2015”:

Averil Nero and her amazing team approached us last fall, after deciding that Operation Freedom Paws would be the beneficiary of the 12th annual 2015 “A Table Affair”. Every year this successful event is met with more enthusiasm by the Monterey Peninsula community. The Lodge at Pebble Beach is happy to welcome Averil's dedicated participants, each of whom chooses a theme and then decorates

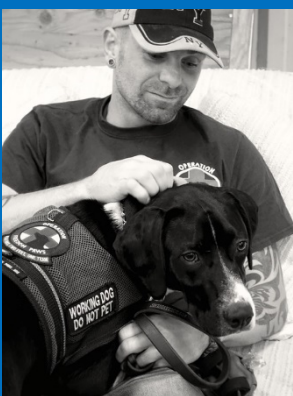


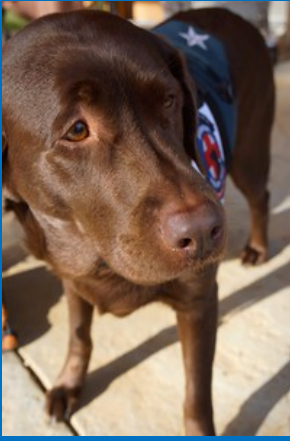
a beautiful table for the public to view. Along with staff members, four of OFP's veterans and their service dogs were in attendance. Everyone had many opportunities to chat with new people about our mission, and the veterans were able to explain how having a service dog has helped

them personally. Thanks to Averil and her team, we were able to educate people about how service dogs can assist those with invisible injuries, and reach new potential supporters.

### OFP Golf Tournament:

On Saturday, May 2<sup>nd</sup> the Operation Freedom Paws 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Golf Tournament Fundraiser was held at Eagle Ridge Golf Course. With a 1pm shotgun start,





35 golfers came out to support our disabled veterans, civilians and their (rescued) service dogs.

While they waited for golfers to come off the course, dinner-only guests were



treated to the panoramic view from Eagle Ridge clubhouse balcony. After everyone enjoyed a delicious buffet, the group was addressed by OFP founder, Mary Cortani. The evening ended with announcements of the silent auction and drawing winners.

Operation Freedom Paws Golf Tournament has had

the most successful year to date, thanks in large part to our sponsors and donors. The funds raised will be matched up to \$20,000 by Macquarie for the fourth year in a row. Thank you Macquarie!

We would also like to thank this year's generous tournament sponsors:

Whole Foods Market Blossom Hill  
Shadow Operations, LLC,  
Ford Store Morgan Hill  
JB Trophies  
SFO Charity Golf Tournament  
Saut Media  
Real Estate Solutions  
Mobile Wash and Grooming Services  
Wenholz Electric  
First St. Coffee.



A special thank you goes out to all of our wonderful volunteers who worked tirelessly to make this an enjoyable experience for our guests. Thank you to all of our generous supporters, donors and guests. We could not have had such a successful event without you! Your generosity is changing lives!



## How you can help

- Look us up! We offer civilian training too! Proceeds from our public training activities help support our work with veterans and other individuals with disabilities. All proceeds will benefit OFP's nonprofit program.
- Traveling? Working? Our new daycare and boarding services for the public also benefit OFP's nonprofit program. We have dedicated staff on hand 24/7 to make sure the dogs in our care have a great experience with us!



- Have time to volunteer? There are youth and adult volunteer opportunities. Contact Volunteer Coordinator Michelle Beasley at [info@operationfreedompaws.org](mailto:info@operationfreedompaws.org)
- Make a secure credit card donation by using the “Donate” button at <http://operationfreedompaws.org> or send a check to Operation Freedom Paws at our mailing address listed above.
- Shop on Amazon? Use Amazon Smile and a percentage of your total is given to your favorite charity; which we hope is OFF.



- Click the “wish list” button to purchase an item from the Operation Freedom Paws Wish List. This purchase will go directly to a dog and human team!
- Proclaim your love for OFF by purchasing your very own “swag” from our new online store (linked to our website).
- Come support us at our next event!
- Like us on Facebook, follow us on Twitter, and share our posts with your friends!



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