



Operation Freedom Paws

Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team

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Operation Freedom Paws

777 First Street,

PMB 515

Gilroy, CA 95020

(408) 683-9010

Find us online at:

operationfreedompaws.org



"Everything, every day is a training opportunity."

-Mary Cortani

Founder's Message—2014 Creating a Home out of Chaos

Last year at this time we were asking you, our readers and donors, to contribute to our "Fur-ever" home, sustain us while we continued to grow as a nonprofit, and help us expand our social impact. Thanks to your support, we achieved those goals in 2014. We are excited about everything the new OFP Canine Education Center (CEC) can offer our clients, their families and the public.

The inadequate size of the space we were in during much of 2014, along with temporary diversion of our limited resources to lease, permit and refurbish the CEC, forced us to slow new-client enrollment last year. But by October, once the CEC was up and running, we were able to start contacting the 100+ people whose applications had crossed my desk. Since 2012, the number of requests I receive for service dogs has grown exponentially--from an average of one per week to five per week. I see no signs of that slowing.

From the initial interview onward, Operation Freedom Paws challenges clients to think about their "new normal" and to dare to dream about the possibilities of tomorrow. They begin trusting us in part because they see that we are ourselves consistently creating that new normal for OFP, and dreaming about the possibilities of tomorrow for the organization. We are able to do this because of you.

Your support allows OFP to reach out a helping hand to these individuals, many of whom have lost faith in humanity and in the systems they fought to preserve. Clients understand that our program only exists because of you. Knowing that strangers actually care about what happens to them makes it possible for them to take on our challenge of creating that new normal. You give them hope; you allow them to dream of the possibility of a different tomorrow. Because of you, there is an "OFP Family", and you are part of it. And for that, we are eternally grateful.

Mary Cortani
Founder and President



A year of “Change”: 2014

2014 was an exciting year for our organization. We continued to raise public awareness locally of issues being faced by veterans, and many were encouraged to reach out to us for assistance. Class sizes doubled again, and with this increase came the biggest change of this year, we moved to a 4.2 acre lot with two training facilities and a front office. This change has allowed us to open a commercial dog kennel which will help offset some costs of the program through an active revenue stream. It has also allowed us to continue adding clients even with the increased class sizes, ensuring we have the space to separate classes into groups of similar skill levels.

Two new trainees in Southern California were added to our roster in 2014 as well as a new mentor-trainer there to help begin a satellite program. In addition to doing daily homework with their dogs, each client works with the new mentor trainer once a week and come up to OFP’s Canine Education Center every 5-6 weeks for training with our founder Mary Cortani.

We continued to expand our social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, and opened an Instagram account. Social media allows us to assist people in remote locations who don’t have access to a trainer, and are therefore training their own service dogs---a practice that is allowed by the ADA and which we wholeheartedly support.

Thank you to the many people who offered to help OFP this year. Volunteer work has had significant impacts this year from helping us raise money for the program, to helping prepare our “fur”-ever home for our move-in. Services were also donated by our marketing firm, accountant, legal counsel and printer.

As seen in the previous newsletters, we held our annual golf tournament fundraiser in the spring, a 5k Fun Run and a Poker Run in the summer and our annual Wine Gala in the fall. We continued to utilize our partnership with DreamPower, allowing our veterans and their families to have access to licensed therapists at class sessions. Our Amazon Wish List has generated an amazing and gratifying response. Donors provided equipment, toys and treats to help us supply everything new clients needed to get off to the best possible start with their dogs.

2014 by the Numbers:

- **21** six-hour public access tests were conducted to certify new service dog teams
 - **11** veterans (52%)
 - **9** civilian adults (43%)
 - **1** youth (5%)
- **31** new clients were enrolled in the program; **2** dropped out during the year. **7** of the dogs matched with new clients were rescues; **12** were career change dogs (animals bred by other working-dog organizations, and ultimately deemed unsuitable for their parent programs); **12** are training their own dogs, who have been evaluated and are suitable for the service work their owner/handlers need.
- **10** additional dogs were rescued and put into foster care for future matches.
- **121** new applications were received



Awards

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

A Peek at 2015

We have secured a mentor trainer for our Southern California satellite program and are now just looking for a home base. In the meantime, we will continue to develop our program to help those in need in that area.

Our new Canine Education Center has had many operational changes completed, but there are many more projects we hope to accomplish this year such as: completing the play yards, putting down decomposed granite around our agility yard for wheelchair accessibility, a victory garden and much, much more.

With our new center operational, we have already been able to accept ten new clients into the program. We still have new applications coming into us weekly, so we are aiming to at least make a dent in our waiting list by the end of 2015.

Building our relationships with integral organizations will continue to be the key to growth over the course of 2015. We will leverage our established partnership with DreamPower Horsemanship, to increase awareness around the Bay Area about the missions and accomplishments of both organizations. Not only will they continue providing our organization with a licensed therapist at our class sessions for our clients, we will also plan to start support groups throughout the week for clients and their families. Our mutually-beneficial affiliation with Camp Tuolumne Trails will continue; two more family dog camp weekends are planned for this year.

We have multiple fundraising events for this upcoming year. Kicking off with our Easter Egg Hunt, we also will have our annual golf tournament, poker run, wine event, holiday photos and much, much more! Keep informed by checking our website, Facebook page and Twitter feed for upcoming events.

Meet Sheldon and Gene

What branch of the military were you in?
Army

What was your ranking? Sergeant E-5

When and where did you serve? Operation Iraqi Freedom 2002-2003, Operation Enduring Freedom 2004-2005, Spent some time in Alisad, Iraq 2005-2006.

How did you learn about OFP? I learned of OFP through my PTSD Clinical Team (PCT) doctor, and she learned about it through some other guys who were in the program already. Jeremiah (an OFP mentor trainer) being one of them, and so I met with him a few times before joining the program.



We are Hiring!

Do you LOVE working with dogs and their owners? Or know someone who does? Apply to be a Kennel Technician at [Indeed](#).



What was a typical day for you before you were matched with your dog? When I am okay, when I am 100%, I can make you laugh all day long; anybody will tell you that. I would make you laugh till you can't stop, but my life has changed since my combat experiences and it made me a different person, and I don't like that person and it comes and goes still today. A typical day was very dark, I used to hate going



to doctor's appointments in Menlo Park because I would get stuck in traffic. A typical day without Gene, well I was up all night and couldn't sleep. I would just sit in the house, in the living room watching TV and daydream. Keep my windows closed and dark, check my doors constantly to make sure they were locked. Just very, very dark. I cannot even describe anything good about that time. It was rough for my wife Dion and my son as well; it was hard because they didn't like the person I became. They left me alone, they didn't want anything to do with me because there was a lot of fights. It was rough, it was hard for us to even communicate, it was really bad. I am not proud about any of that time at all.

What about this program/process

attracted you? In the beginning I had heard things about it and I wanted to try it out

because I wanted to get better. I didn't want to continue to be the person I was. It was hard, I had heard things that it was helpful because animals can sense things about us and they give support. I said, "I don't know how a dog is going to help me." So I was very skeptical in the beginning. I just wanted to try it out to see how exactly it would work.

Was there anything about the "idea" of having a service dog that gave you concerns?

Yeah, a lot of concerns. One is the attention from other people, I don't like people staring me down and still today, I have a problem with that. Just the fact that when you have a service dog, you have to take it outside and to be outside around people at the time, I didn't like that idea. But, as time went on, I thought I would get used to the idea and it would be okay to be outside. And now it is even okay for people to ask me questions about him, and that is when I started to realize, that it is not that bad outside; it's not that bad outside at all.

Did Mary match you with Gene? If so, was there any hesitation to your relationship?

Yes, Mary matched me with Gene. It was a bond with Gene and I first met, he was so welcoming to me. When I first got him at the old building, Janet (another mentor trainer) was there and Mary called me up and said "We got your dog" and so I was anxious. I was kind of nervous too about now having this dog. So I went into the old building and Mary had him there and she let go of Gene and he just came right to me and I gave him a big hug and I felt like, okay, this is a step forward, I am making movements now. The bond with him and I was instant. I trusted him quickly because I knew he was trained originally to be a Seeing Eye dog and he came already potty trained and everything so it wasn't him that I had to worry about, it was just me.



What are some of the issues you faced in trying to achieve your certification? How did you overcome these obstacles? The biggest struggle was me coming to class. Mary can tell you, I didn't really want to be bothered by people and so the hardest thing for me was being able to come out here and be a part of the program. And when I did show up, I didn't want to be associated with anybody, I was like, "I am here, leave me alone, and let me get my stuff done. I did my part, I got my numbers in." This all changed after I was without my dog for three days. I was thinking about him (Gene) and I started feeling really bad, like I had let my battle buddy down, and that's when I thought, "you know what, I am gonna start getting serious with this program" and you know, get my life together.

What tools from the program did you find most useful (if there is any one in particular)? Being able to communicate. When they question us after class about why they are a service dog and stuff that really helped me a lot. Because I usually didn't go anywhere, and before at the old building, I would say that I would just go to another building or another store, I didn't care. I wasn't going to argue with you (business owner) back and forth about a service dog, that's just going to piss me off. I get ticked off pretty easily and so to debate back and forth about whether Gene is a service dog or not is not worth my time. He helps me, he helps me to be here and talk with you in a better way. So the questions after class helped me a lot, and also to listen to the other clients and their experiences, I try to learn from what they said and remember what they said so if it happens to me, I know how to react. There are a lot of tools, a lot of tools that this program offers, that I use every day.

What are some of the challenges you face out in public?

Going to a dog supply store because people with their pets have their dogs walking all over the place and trying to get at Gene and it makes me very nervous. Gene didn't say anything because he was with me, but I was wondering "why



can't these people get control of their dogs?" and then that's when I started realizing that these are pets and it's different. Some came to approach me and Gene and Gene was like, "Hey, what's going on with this dog?" So I had to ask them a few times, if they could keep an eye on their dog and they of course said, "Oh, I am sorry." Another challenge is people approaching me and stuff. That was a big thing in the beginning because I didn't really know how to approach it. I would get these people saying, "Oh what a sweet puppy, I used to have one just like it" and they would ask if they can pet him and stuff. I tell them they can't pet him right now he is working, you can talk to him, but to pet you have to ask me. So that was a big challenge, but that is easier for me now to deal with. Still sometimes when I am with Dion we go out sometimes to the grocery store and people tend to look at me and I feel threatened a little bit. I am still trying to figure out how to deal with it, because they look at me like I am some strange alien. But again, that is part of the deal of having a service animal and invisible wounds, they don't see anything wrong with you.

How is your life different now with Gene? The changes just came natural. My life



is calmer now, he keeps me calm, when I feel stressed out I get him and he recognizes it and lets me know that everything is okay. Even though he doesn't talk to me, I feel like I am talking to him and so we get along. I didn't believe Mary at first when she told me he would be able to do that stuff, but now when I get agitated, he comes closer to me and lets me know "I am right here for you"; so he keeps me calm. He makes me realize that the outside is okay and I am still learning. Mostly now when I think about him, I try to forget all the bad stuff.

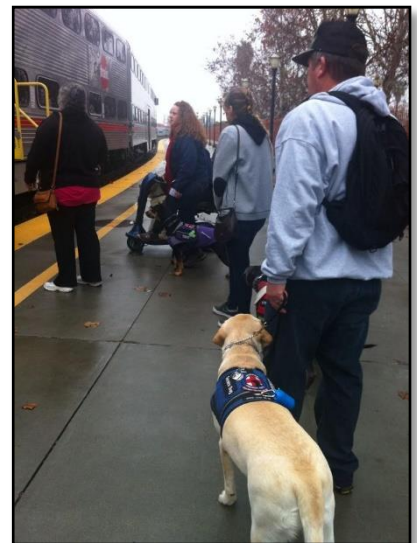
How have things changed for your family? Things have gotten better over the past year and a half, they started realizing what was going on by the things they read, your newsletters and stuff, that it is a process. Like my wife in the beginning didn't really understand the whole process and what was going on. She knew something was wrong, but she didn't know how to deal with it and she came to a couple programs with me up in Menlo Park and talked with the doctors and I don't know what they talked about, but I started seeing a change in her. And then she came down and talked with Mary, volunteered and did some work to help OFP and she started recognizing what was going on. She was more understanding and that is when things started getting better. When I am in a dark place, and she recognizes that, she automatically gets my meds for me and says, "Take this stuff right now." And it helps me, it helps me. The relationship with the family is better, my son I am not as aggressive in the arguments as I was before. When I request him to get things done, it is done on time and it's perfect. They are working with me basically and things are better and Gene is a big part of it, because they like him.

Sheldon and Gene certified this past year and currently live in Texas with Sheldon's wife and son.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day

MLK Freedom Train by Gwen Templeton (OFP Client)

On January 19th, sixteen Operation Freedom Paws clients and their families boarded the 30th annual MLK Freedom Train in San Jose, CA. The Freedom Train is a symbolic remembrance of the distance marched on foot from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights protesters, which was instrumental in passing the 1965 voters rights act. This was the final trip for the Freedom Train, and Operation Freedom Paws clients were invited to take part in the celebration and



Upcoming Events:

OFP Easter Egg Hunt

April 4th, 2015

OFP Annual Golf Tournament

Eagle Ridge Golf Course

May 2nd, 2015

Keep an eye out for more info on our:

Hoof & Woof Poker Run 2015

Wine Gala 2015

solidarity in support of freedoms for all people. OFP clients were able to pay tribute to Dr. King's lifelong mission to provide equal rights and opportunity to all. It was a beautiful sight to see our OFP clients and their dogs tucked in among the riders, clapping and singing as we traveled the fifty-four miles between the two cities. At one point the Freedom Train Chorus, who had been traveling through the cars singing iconic march hymns, reached our car to sing "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around" and "Wade in the Water". At the end of the hymns the singers looked down and gleefully announced, "Look at all the doggies on the train! I love all these dogs on the train, I did not even know they were there."

The Freedom Train was a remarkable experience as sixteen OFP teams and their families were able to sit on a crowded train filled with loud noises, clapping and singing. Once at the station we all embarked into a crowd of two-thousand people.



A crowd that size can be very difficult for anyone to navigate, but with all of our training the OFP teams gathered in the front of the station and then made our own little march to lunch and celebrate the achievements of the day.

Standing in line with the rest of the OFP group in that sea of people was such a success. There we were celebrating freedom and opportunity for all, and our service dogs are certainly giving freedom to their handlers. "Every day is a

training opportunity", and this trip was a great opportunity to practice and demonstrate our training to the people of San Jose!

MLK Day of Service

Thanks to Meriwest Credit Union, Oshman Family Jewish Community Center and Robin Vasilakos OFP was able to host its first annual MLK Day of Service! We had 70 volunteers of all ages from around the Bay area give 190 hours to OFP that day; helping us mulch and weed around the Canine Education Center. They also made dog treats and dog toys for our clients. Thank you Oshman Family and Meriwest, and thank you to all the volunteers who came that day!



How you can help



- Look us up! We offer public training too! Proceeds from our 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 via our website at <http://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 OFP.



- 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 OFP 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 Instagram, and share our posts with your friends!



An AMERICAN KENNEL CLUB Program

