

OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS



KICKING OFF 2017



A "PAWS" FOR REFLECTION

SETTING OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS APART FROM THE PACK

No one can ever know everything. This mind-set makes everyone at Operation Freedom Paws constantly evaluate and assess how we can improve our program. We strive to create a safe place for our service dog teams. In doing so, we must be aware of the handlers' potential "triggers". Our clients are typically hypervigilant due to their disability, which means we must also do our best to remain vigilant on their behalf. We can't know what sight, sound or smell will be a trigger for every individual. We constantly try to walk in clients' shoes---see things from their perspective. We not only take preventive measures, but also quickly address any incident that leads to a flashback, so we help bring the person back to the present. Each of our clients has at least one trigger. Something as simple as a dog briefly whimpering during class can mentally transport a client to a scenario where that sound was part of the traumatic experience. Knowing that we do not have all the answers leads us look for help in minimizing trigger-induced episodes. At every class session, we have a therapist available to provide professional assistance to clients. Supporters and donors like you, who believe OFP's mission, allow us to continue improving our program. Together we are saving lives every day.

-Mary Cortani
Founder & Executive Director

OFP WELCOMES NEWEST MEMBER TO THEIR BOARD

JENN LE BLANC: MARKETING STRATEGIST, SCIENTIST, PROFESSIONAL SPEAKER, AUTHOR, COACH, CEO AND FOUNDER



We are proud to announce a new addition to our Board of Directors, Jennifer LeBlanc. Jenn is an entrepreneur and marketing executive focused on transforming people and companies. She is the founder and CEO of ThinkResults Marketing, a top-ranked Silicon Valley marketing agency, and has been involved with Operation Freedom Paws in various capacities for the last five years. Jenn's family is filled with public servants and veterans, including her mother, father, grandfather, and uncle. She is committed to making sure that veterans receive the care and support they deserve, and has a huge soft spot for animals as well.

COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER TO CRACK CRAB FOR A CAUSE

OFP'S FIRST CRAB FEED

On February 4, 2017, Operation Freedom Paws held their first-crab feed. With just over one-hundred tickets sold, we had a great turn out for our first event of 2017. With no formal seating, everyone came to Old City Hall Restaurant with smiles on their faces and empty bellies, ready to eat as much crab as they could manage. Those who were not fond of crab enjoyed their own Cornish game hens.

A silent auction offered various items, from hand-made quilts to home-baked cupcakes. Mary Cortani thanked the attendees for their support of this important cause. She was able to point out clients in the room who, without OFP's program, would not have been there socializing and having a great time.

Many remarked they were looking forward to OFP's next crab feed----luckily, they won't have to wait long. For those who want to return, or those who wish they could attend, we have tickets on sale for Saturday, March 11th at Old City Hall Restaurant. Dinner begins at 6pm and will end at 9pm.

Tickets can be purchased online at <https://ofpcrabfeed.eventbrite.com> or over the phone at (408) 641-7137.



A NEW PARTNERSHIP PROMISES GROWTH

OFP PARTNERS WITH ANGEL FLIGHT WEST



Operation Freedom Paws is delighted to announce a new partnership with Angel Flight West, a nonprofit that arranges free, non-emergency air travel for veterans and others with medical conditions and other compelling needs. In the February 2nd press release, Angel Flight West Executive Director John Olsen and his team are "...thrilled to partner with Operation Freedom Paws to deliver health and hope to veterans in need using donated flights by private pilots to allow

access to life-changing service dogs."

Through this partnership, Operation Freedom Paws will be able to add more clients from outside their local area. These flights will allow clients the ability to attend the 300+ hours of required training to certify with the OFP program.

Read the full press release [here](#).

PEOPLE LOVE US!

OFF RECEIVES 2016 YELP AWARD

Operation Freedom Paws has received the “People Love Us on Yelp” 2016 Award. This is an honor bestowed upon those who have earned the love of their local customers/clients. We would like to give a big thank you to our Board Members, Staff and Volunteers for helping us to be a place that people love!



MEET REGINA & LAYLA

VETERAN: U.S. ARMY

My name is Regina and I am a disabled Army Veteran, stationed at Ft. Lewis from 1999 - 2004. Due to traumatic brain injury (TBI) there is not much I recall about my time in the military. Memories come back in pieces and then flee again.

I do remember training to go to Kosovo, during which 9/11 happened. It was a very scary and emotional time for all of us. I was nowhere near the west coast, and everything came to a halt, we didn't know where we were going next. At least not the enlisted anyway. We ended up in Kosovo after all, but that was no easy task either. Locked and loaded, improvised vehicle armored Humvees, I had also experienced many convoy supports, checkpoints, search and seizures and political rallies.

I was not deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq during my time. Somehow, by fate, I can only guess, I missed both deployments to Afghanistan. The first time I was sent to another unit, and the second time, I was in a near fatal traffic accident, surviving only because there was an emergency response team responding to another accident across the highway.

I had just completed volunteering for a casualty replacement deployment, my orders were in place. Like any soldier this is what hit me first when I realized I would not be going.



Survivors remorse. I could not watch the news, I could not talk to people, it took years before I even wanted to be around family.

I had shut down, my life had no meaning, no purpose, no value, I didn't want to be here. I can't tell you the number of times I heard others tell me that I wasn't meant to go Afghanistan because maybe something worse could've happened or that I'd have been killed. Quite honestly, I would have welcomed being killed as opposed to someone else. I have struggled with this.

Because of my parent's constant urging for me get to me out and around people, including other Veterans, I

began volunteering at the VA hospital in Fresno. I really enjoyed this and was trained as a No Veteran Dies Alone volunteer.

Even after years of meds and counseling nothing seemed to keep me completely afloat. A service dog had been mentioned a few times, but nothing ever came of it, until one of my therapists mentioned Operation Freedom Paws.

It wasn't till this cute little brindle puppy came into my life that things took a dynamic twist. I had never owned a dog. I knew I couldn't keep her, but had to rescue her from her surroundings. As I began to look for a local dog rescue or good home for her, we began to bond. I was not successful, and was beginning to get positive feedback from not only my therapist, but my mom as well. They saw that Layla was beginning to change my life before their eyes and that's when it was decided that I could and should keep her.

With my VA therapist's help, I applied to OFFP, and on September 12th, 2016, I received my acceptance to Operation Freedom Paws. This was an awesome day for me and I can remember jumping up with a "Really?!?", and giving Janet, one of the mentor trainers, a huge hug. At this point, I wanted to better myself even though I knew it would be a struggle. As Mary always says, "You have to want to get better," there's only so much [OFFP] can do.

[Cont. on Pg. 4]



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

MEET REGINA & LAYLA

VETERAN: U.S. ARMY CONT.

They give us the tools we need and teach us how to apply them in any given situation. I've had my ups and downs the last four and a half months just like the others, but we each all have our challenges in different ways, even if they are similar in some.

We each respond differently to the world around us. OFP has given me hope that maybe one day I can do something more with my life. Hell, just out right living my life and enjoying it. I recall going out on the wharf in Monterey watching people walk down the streets with ease sipping their lattes enjoying life, while I was on guard constantly and scanning, being startled by noises and unable to make my way through crowds or be around people. My training with Layla not only forces me to get out, but I can go out knowing that she has my back. I can have people approach me or vice versa and be able to manage to get through whatever the circumstances are with a clearer head. Operation Freedom Paws program has allowed me to live in a more positive frame of mind, knowing that Layla will alert me to my needs throughout the day. The more training we go through, the more vigilant she becomes to those needs. I need only to learn to recognize what it is she's trying to tell me which is the difficult part, but well worth the challenge.

And if I'm having a rough day at training and Layla doesn't want to respond because of something going on with me, there's always someone to talk to; whether it be a mentor/trainer to tell you they've been there before and to keep your head up it gets better, or even OFP's therapist for emotional support.



I have bonded with Layla, and I've been given a different outlook on life instead of wanting to extinguish it. I cannot find words to express my gratitude to this organization that gives so much of their time and effort to help each and every one of us unique individuals. The love that is put forth in this program resonates throughout every person in need that walks through their door. I've met amazing people and have an amazing dog. And I can only continue to hope to do my best for myself and others as well because of this.

Thank you Operation Freedom Paws for changing my life for the better and showing me that I have something to give back to others as well, that my life does indeed have meaning even if I'm still struggling to understand the how's and why's of it. My advice to anyone thinking about applying for a service dog, Operation Freedom Paws is the way to go.