

OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS



OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS IN 2023



A MESSAGE FROM OUR FOUNDER, MARY CORTANI *Small Steps Can Lead to Lasting Change*

Well, 2023 has started off kind of crazy; rain, snow, flooding, turbulence all around. Yet here we are continuing to fight the fight to do our small part to provide service dogs to veterans, first responders, kids, and other individuals with disabilities, including their families. It has been a busy year so far and we are seeing and supporting greater needs.

We are constantly growing, and I am greatly appreciative of all the support from our volunteers and clients who pitch in to make us a success. This is another example of how it really does take a village. This village truly has come together and made an impact. I couldn't do this alone, and I am eternally grateful for all the support and help OFP receives. I am busier than I have ever been and though it gets tough sometimes, my life is enriched every day by the clients we serve. We genuinely are a family, and I am proud of that family.

We treat each client as an individual because no two clients are the same. This approach requires that we constantly evolve and expand our resources and services. As mentioned in past newsletters, we have forged new relationships to help provide healing moments when things "click" for our clients and keep them on track to keep moving forward. These relationships are possible because our staff is vigilant about researching new methodologies and policy changes that effect those with disabilities and identifying other groups that provide services which align with our mission. Whenever possible, we partner with other organizations to give our clients the best resources and experiences to help them along their journeys to achieve their new normal. The dogs are the key that opens the lock so healing can begin. Our team then provides additional tools to help continue the healing process. We never know throughout the course of the program when a healing moment is going to occur for an individual. When it does, it's magical! Everyone at Operation Freedom Paws shares in the rewarding experience, knowing that we have helped save two lives in the process.

On another note, we participated in a research project with an amazing veteran, Jeremy Ramirez, at Johns Hopkins University. The research has been completed and we are awaiting the publication of three papers this year. Once the first paper comes out, we will be sharing some of the

Founder's Message (cont'd)

exciting results from this research project examining how service dogs affect a veteran's quality of life. It has been our honor to be a small part of this amazing body of important research and data.

*"It is often the small steps, not the giant leaps, that bring about the most lasting change."
– Queen Elizabeth II*

My Sincerest Gratitude,

Mary Cortani, Founder and Executive Director of Operation Freedom Paws



Veteran Connor Quinn

Connor is an Army Veteran who served nine years in Afghanistan as a combat medic. He worked at Operation Freedom Paws to help his fellow veterans while earning his Bachelor's Degree in Health Sciences at San Jose State University. His time at OFP inspired him to co-author the children's book, "Four Paws, Two Feet, One Team" with our founder, Mary Cortani. Connor is now pursuing his doctorate in chiropractic medicine from Palmer University. This article was written in July of 2022. We thank Connor for bravely sharing this story with us now. Please note this article discusses thoughts of suicide and substance abuse.

"I Thought I Was Saving Them By Not Telling Them"

I've been struggling for a long time. I thought I had PTSD kicked after repairing the fractured relationships I had after I left the Army. I guess I got so comfortable having these things buried inside that I no longer felt that those issues were even there. Things started to unravel for me back in September when Afghanistan fell and I did what worked for me in the past when dealing with issues from that place. I shoved it down and poured booze on it. This has worked for over a decade so why mess with tradition?



I kept this going into the holidays, feeling more isolated and alone than ever, not knowing how to bring up these emotions. I used to take breaks from drinking during the work week or maybe just have a glass or two. But now I found I couldn't take a break, at least not for more than a day. On top of everything, I was dealing with stress from school, stress from family, stress from my interpersonal relationships, to the point that one night an incident of petty jealousy on my part reopened a very old wound. That old wound led to panic attacks that I tried to control with my tried and true method. So I ditched class, went home, and proceeded to down a bottle of bourbon. I had intended to only take a few shots to calm my nerves. This was the first time in my career of drinking that I could not put the bottle down.

Most of what happened next is a blur. I punched out a glass framed map of Afghanistan I had hanging up in the living room. The fact that I didn't destroy my hand is a miracle. Sometime during all

Veteran Connor Quinn

"I Thought I Was Saving Them By Not Telling Them" (cont'd)

of this happening, I pulled my .45 out and put it to my head, multiple times, and tried to pull the trigger. At some point I texted a buddy for help, and he, along with my roommate, cleaned me up. They listened to the drunken rambling I spewed, took the gun away, and cared for me. I don't know how bad things would have gotten that day without them. All I know is that I never wanted to find out. The thing is, this isn't the first time I've almost gone down this road. Coming back from my first tour I almost ended it and I almost did it again after I got out. But this was the first time that alcohol took over and wasn't the antidote to filling that empty space inside of me.



I want everyone to know I am doing better. This hasn't been easy at all. I'm lucky to have friends around me to help out when I need them. I'm also incredibly lucky to have been involved with Operation Freedom Paws and Mary Cortani because after struggling to get a mental health appointment through the VA and other resources, I placed a call to her and started working with an amazing therapist. I finally started opening up to my family about the things I've seen and done, the pain and frustration I've felt for all these years. I thought I was saving them from those things by not telling them. Looking back I realize I was just trying to not need them. I had turned off my empathy and wasn't ready to receive the love that my family had to offer, the love that was always there that I was just too callous to feel.

I'm writing this because, well I'm a writer. If there's a chance that what I have to share can help someone who's in a similar situation, rather than letting their thoughts eat at them, feeling like there is no way out, I want them to know there is. Find someone to talk to, vent, get it out and take your time with it. I've been in therapy for several months now and only this weekend did I find the courage to call my mother and let her know everything that was going on with me. The funny thing is she already knew and was just waiting for me to be ready to talk to her about it.

I think we all love a good story and I've been thinking a lot about mine. The best stories always have struggle, strife, and a difficult journey to go through before you get to that happy ending. The forgetful stories are those that just jump to the happy endings without earning that spot. The point I'm making here is that I almost ended my story in the worst way possible. You have to love your life story and I'm looking at this period of my life with that attitude.

HOW TO GET HELP

988 - Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a United States - based suicide prevention network of more than 160 crisis centers that provides 24/7 service via a toll-free hotline with the number. It is available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

Crisis Hotline - Text HELLO to 741741

Veterans Crisis Line - 1-800-273-8255, press 1

Mary Cortani Honored

Celebrate Morgan Hill's "2023 Woman Of The Year"



We're thrilled to announce that our founder and executive director, Mary Cortani, was named the "2023 Woman of the Year" by the Morgan Hill Chamber of Commerce. Each year, their Celebrate Morgan Hill Awards honors individuals, businesses, and nonprofits for the positive impact they are making in the community. So it seems fitting that the nominees are submitted by the community, then selected by a voting committee comprised of previous recipients. We were told that when Mary's name was announced, several chamber members who have watched her work in the community over the years were moved to tears.

President and CEO of the Morgan Hill Chamber of Commerce, Nick Gaich, shared with *Morgan Hill Life*, "The 2023 awardees are a stellar reflection of inspiration and community engagement", he further remarked, "we are proud to recognize brilliance in the organizations and individuals proudly serving Morgan Hill." Mary learned about the exciting news when the Morgan Hill Chamber, represented by Nick Gaich, Lori Allen, Brooke Hoekstra, Mellea McLaughlin, Kylie McLaughlin and Mark Fenichel, surprised her with the honor at Operation Freedom Paws. Mary was humbled to become part of such a meaningful legacy that spanned over 67 years and 350 recipients. She shared, "I'm in such great company with the other award honorees." It was particularly special for Mary to be honored alongside her fellow veteran, friend and OFP supporter, Charles Weston, who was named the "2023 Man of the Year". Mary reflected on her admiration for the Morgan Hill community behind this honor by sharing, "we can all have our differences but at the end of the day, we live in a community that supports one another and wants to see the best in all of us."

The Morgan Hill Chamber of Commerce recognized Mary and the other honorees at the Celebrate Morgan Hill Awards held at Guglielmo Winery on March 12th. The theme this year was "Sip and Celebrate: A Vintage Garden Party". State and local leaders, business owners, colleagues, and friends were in attendance to pay tribute to the honorees. Mary was personally joined by Dr. Curt Moran, Terry Moran, OFP Ambassador Therapy Dog Team Sergeant Ed Soares and Duke, Jocelyn Beard Soares, Phyllis Pierce, and the OFP marketing team, Scott and Pam MacDougall. The Celebrate Morgan Hill Awards was a beautiful evening where the power of community really shined. Thank you to the Morgan Hill Chamber of Commerce and the Morgan Hill community for recognizing our founder and executive director with this beautiful honor.

OFP Daycare & Boarding–An Update from Renee, Director of Operations

The Ins and Outs and Do's and Don'ts of OFP Daycare & Boarding

Arriving at our facility:

We love our furry guests and they love coming to OFP, so much so that we've actually had dogs jump out of vehicles to check in at the front desk or go visit walking dogs. This is incredibly dangerous in so many ways. If you want to roll down your car windows, allow only enough room for the tip of their nose, but no more, even if they are buckled in. You want to keep this in mind for the driver's window too. Preferably, dogs should ride inside the vehicle, in the backseat. It's important to disable airbags if you permit your dog to sit in the front seat. Dogs should exit vehicles from the passenger side door. This is a best practice especially if you park on public streets where cars go by the driver's side. Make sure your dog is wearing a well-fitted collar and is on leash when exiting the car. Do not bring a retractable leash; those are not permitted on OFP property. I could write a whole article alone on the dangers of retractable leashes.

Checking in:

Please be prepared by bringing all the required and necessary items needed for your dog's visit. Make sure their vaccinations are up to date and you've provided us with a copy of those vaccinations from the veterinarian. We require Rabies, Distemper/Parvo, Bordetella, Canine Influenza, and Leptospirosis. Let staff know of any health or behavior changes so we can better serve your pup. Has Fluffy recently been eating socks or had an injury? Please let us know!!



What to bring:

When it comes to preparing food, we accept pre-portioned bagged food, whole bags of food with measurement instructions, and personal containers of food. You can bring dry, canned, dehydrated, or raw food. We have refrigerators and freezers for storage. It's a good idea to bring a little extra, just in case your return is delayed. You can leave your measuring cups and bowls at home; we've got plenty! Medication should be provided in the original prescription bottle. Staff will document all food, treats, and medications upon check in. Please remember, we are a peanut-free facility.

OFP Daycare & Boarding–An Update from Renee, Director of Operations

The Ins and Outs and Do's and Don'ts of OFP Daycare & Boarding (Cont'd)

Customers are welcome to bring comfort items from home. This can be a blanket your dog loves to lie on or a favorite stuffed animal. Some customers will sleep in a shirt or on a towel for a few days prior to their visit and bring that in for their pup. Please leave oversized or damaged items at home. The following items are prohibited at OFP: severely torn items, chuck-it balls, rubber balls, choke chains, shock e collars, peanut products, dental chews, Greenies, rawhide, pig ears, chicken bone/dumbbell treats, bully sticks, antlers, raw marrow bones, and anything deemed a choking hazard.

Leaving:

Before you leave our facility, make sure your pickup date/time is correct and your contact information is up to date. If you want additional services such as exit bath, nail trim, or one-on-one obedience training, please inform the staff. When you're ready, please keep your goodbye quick and upbeat.

Checking up:

Want to know how your pup is doing during their stay with us? Check out our social media platforms where we post lots of adorable photos of customers' pups! You can find us on our Facebook page at facebook.com/OFPKennel and our Instagram handle is @ofpdaycareandboarding. You can also call the center at 408-683-9010 or email us at ofpkennel@gmail.com to get questions answered or check up on your pup. Please don't hesitate to contact us.

Picking up:

Personal property including food and medication will be returned upon pick up. Please remember to bring your leash. After check out, your pup will be potty walked and brought to the front desk. As with dropping off, and as hard as it may be, try to save the more emotional squeals and kisses for when you are in the car or back home. This calm method of dropping off and picking up will really help your dog manage separation and anxiety.

And our last DO's:

DO love your dog in every moment, of every day, even when they decide the headliner in your car looks like a chew toy. Do call us or stop by if you have any questions. Do call us way in advance, but only with legitimate reservations. Cancellations are hard on nonprofits and it's almost impossible for us to backfill. Do learn about our mission. The daycare and boarding facility helps fund our mission and is the reason our doors are open to the public. Your business helps to save lives at both ends of the leash. Do share your positive experiences with friends and on social media. Thank you OFP Daycare and Boarding community!



First Quarter Event Highlights

Your Community Saves Lives

FEBRUARY - OFP CRAB FEED

We asked OFP supporters to “crabby diem” and they did. The OFP Crab Feed Fundraiser was a sold-out event! With a fun sea-faring theme, supporters enjoyed a delicious crab feast, beautiful live music with Brooke and Emil, a great silent auction and mystery treasure chest drawing. It was a night filled with lots of laughter and a few tears. Everyone was moved when OFP Mentor-Trainer Ramon shared the impact the program has made in his life and the lives of his family members. He thanked his family who were in attendance for taking this healing journey through the program with him.



Special thanks to Fran, Bobby and their team at Old City Hall Restaurant (Gilroy), Brooke and Emil, Amber and Ray at Costco (Gilroy), Alan Chan, all our volunteers, our founder Mary, our staff, board members and in-kind donors: Mainstream Boutique Morgan Hill, Murphy's Mercantile, Family Pet Care Center, Poppy Jasper International Film Festival, Great America, Randy and Jennyann Thilmany, John and Catherine Kauer, Giorgio's Italian Grill & Pizzeria-Morgan Hill, Panther Creek Farm, Sushi Confidential Morgan Hill, Morgan Hill Chamber of Commerce, Gilroy Chamber of Commerce, *Gilroy Life* and *Morgan Hill Life*.

MARCH - OFP PASTA FEED

We had a great turn out for the OFP All-You-Can-Eat Pasta Feed. We loved connecting with friends both old and new. Our supporters enjoyed a variety of tasty pastas, wonderful live music with Cook 'N Fenny Combo, an awesome silent auction, drawings, and a wine pull. Our founder and executive director Mary did a special Q&A with supporters answering all their questions and sharing insights about the program.

A big shout out again to Fran, Bobby and their team at Old City Hall Restaurant, Cook 'N Fenny Combo, Donna and Ray at Costco Gilroy, our clients, all our volunteers, staff, board members, Alan Chan and in-kind donors: Morgan Hill Bowl, Garlic World, Craft Roots, Palmerino's Morgan Hill, BookSmart, Pintello Comedy Theater, Ramon, Monique, Izabella, Johnny and Vanessa, Karen Burch and Cheryl Benz, Dr. Curt Moran, Terry Moran and Phyllis Pierce.



Both the OFP Crab and All-You-Can-Eat Pasta feeds help to bring vital resources to our clients and their families like mental health counseling, training, veterinarian care and food for OFP service dogs, gas cards, and temporary housing among other services that support the success of their healing journeys. Thank you OFP community!

Upcoming OFP Events

Come Join Us!

APRIL 8, 2023 - OFP COMMUNITY EASTER EGG HUNT

Easter is just a hop, skip and a jump away! You know what that means? It's time for Operation Freedom Paws Community Easter Egg Hunt! (Tickets now available at ofpeaster2023.givesmart.com)

Event entry is free, so bring the whole family and join us for some Springtime fun and games. We'll have a bouncy house, face painting, and of course our annual Easter Egg Hunt where we're hatching up some great prizes! It's just \$7.00 for kids 10 and under to participate in the egg hunt.

And we're excited to announce our very special guest, The Easter Bunny! "Hop" to see you there!

* For the health and safety of all dogs boarding at OFP, please no pets allowed, service dogs only.



MAY 12, 2023 - 12TH ANNUAL GOLF TOURNAMENT/LUNCHEON

Help save two lives, one swing at a time! Come join us for an 18-hole shotgun scramble tournament at Coyote Creek Golf Club on the Valley Course designed by golf legend, Jack Nicklaus. The Valley Course is beautifully engineered to engage golfers of all skill levels.

(Tickets & Sponsorships now available at putt2savelives.givesmart.com)

You'll enjoy a warm up on the driving range, light breakfast, course refreshments (3 complimentary beers included), contests, silent auction, drawings, and a delicious lunch buffet overlooking the 18th hole featuring Casino Roast and Chicken Madeira. 1st, 2nd and 3rd place teams and contest winners will receive awards and prizes. Tickets are \$185.00 per person.



AUGUST 5, 2023 - 12TH ANNUAL "PAWS WITH PATRIOTS WINE GALA"

Raise a glass, raise a paddle, and help raise funds for lifesaving service dog teams. Hosted by Bay Area radio personality Jona Denz-Hamilton and the Mayor of Morgan Hill, Mark Turner, you'll enjoy wine from across Santa Clara Valley, live music, dancing, and an incredible silent and live auction. Supporters will get the opportunity to hear powerful stories from our founder and executive director, Mary Cortani, and our clients about how your community is empowering profound change.

All proceeds raised at OFP events go toward empowering veterans, first responders, children, and other individuals with disabilities to restore their freedom to live life, by teaching them to train a rescued dog for their specific disabilities and creating lifesaving service dog teams - at no cost to them.

(Tickets and event details coming soon!)

