

OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS



OPERATION FREEDOM PAWS IN 2023



A MESSAGE FROM OUR FOUNDER, MARY CORTANI *A Ray of Hope*

As I sit here and write this founder's message, I am reminded of the need for hope. Times are crazy, folks are divided, we survived the crazy weather from the first part of this year. We added clients and continued to do what we do every day, despite it all, believing tomorrow will be better than today. One step at a time just like we tell our clients.

We treat each client as an individual, because no two clients are the same. The dogs are the key that opens the lock so healing can begin. Our team then provides additional tools to help complete 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 saved two lives in the process.

The average person spends 28% of their work week reading and answering email - that's over a quarter of each day in your inbox. While this mode of communication may be the reality of the modern day, it does tend to be on the drier side of human interaction. I wonder how many people will actually read this newsletter. Does it make a difference? I believe so, because our goal with the newsletter is to keep you informed of what happens at Operation Freedom Paws, and show you the impact of our donors and supporters.

May was "Mental Health Awareness" Month, and June is "PTSD Awareness" Month, but every month should be mental health month. We need to talk openly, have conversations to understand and not judge a book by its cover. We have more in common than not. We all struggle with problems. I sit here writing this and struggle with telling you that WE are struggling. We need more donations, more money, more support, more awareness around the issues that our clients and their families face every day. I am a glass half-full kind of gal, but it gets hard sometimes. And when it does, I stop and take a moment to do some self-care. Self-care is very important. We cannot take care of others without it.

We need your help each and every day to give hope to those who have little to none--those who finally reach out to us when they feel like it's their last shot at someone caring and believing they are worthy of help. Will you be our ray of hope? Will you help a veteran, first responder or child with a disability find hope and a better tomorrow? Will you help us save that person, dog, and family? Please help us help them. We need each other for all to dare to believe. May your life be filled with blessings. May tomorrow be better than today. May someone believe in you the way we believe in our clients.

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

Veteran Megan and Her Service Dog Churro

“Like so many Servicemembers, We are Trained that Failure is Not an Option.”

I truly believe that fate brings us to the places we are meant to be. In the spring of 2019, a friend asked what I had going on, and I told him not much. He asked if I would like to go to his VA appointment with him. I told him sure; I had nothing better to do. Unknowingly, this would be a pivotal moment in my life. As we were parking and waiting to go in, I told him something that I had never told anyone and probably would still have not said anything except for that moment in time. I nonchalantly mentioned that I had been assaulted by a fellow servicemember years ago while on orders. Still to this day I don't know why I felt comfortable enough to say it out loud, but he immediately responded with, “You need to get some help from the VA, like now.” Dave explained the claims process and how to get started. After some thought, I filed that initial claim.

Up until then, I never really noticed how shut in I had become. Going to new places was getting harder and harder, to the point where I would find any excuse to stay home and not go. I finally had my initial exam with the psychiatrist and told my story for the first time. After an emotional 45 minutes, she told me that I had extreme anxiety disorder and really needed to get into the mental health clinic for help. The examiner made the referral for me that day. I was assigned a therapist by the VA who told me about how people use service animals to help them with their mental health and gave me the information for an organization she knew of locally, Operation Freedom Paws.



After our application and intake testing process, Churro and I were accepted into the program that would change our lives. It was hard at the beginning. Like so many servicemembers, we are trained that failure is not an option and we are to hit the ground running. I would get frustrated that me and my 8-month-old puppy were not getting the commands instantly, that we were not learning all the things that everyone else was. One thing that has stuck in my mind is Mary telling us we need to trust the process, and everything is a building block. After what seemed like forever, we finally made it out of the beginner classes and into the service training. I took every moment that I could with Churro to continue to do the techniques we learned in class at home and at work.

Going to our training classes 2-3 days a week forced me to break up the routine of home, work, home with minimal third-party interaction (because people and new things are scary). I met lots of new people who shared common experiences and grew a little more comfortable with the outside. When a year seemed like a really long time at the beginning, by summer the training time started flying by. In December of 2022, we were invited by Mary and the team to do our certification testing. It was a nerve-wracking day, but not once did Churro let me down. That day is a proud moment in my life. And since then, we continue to practice (even when we can't make it to a class as often as I would like) and get even better. Did getting my service dog training through Operation Freedom Paws cure my PTSD and anxiety? No. But they have given me tools for my toolbox in order to continue to make successes and live a fuller, more meaningful life.

If it hadn't been for that moment in the parking lot, who knows what my life would be like today. Would I even be here? I am not perfect; my dog is not perfect. Being introduced to Operation Freedom Paws changed my life and I will continue to be a cheerleader to others making their journey through the program. Hopefully one day when the timing is right, I will come back to help teach others and give back to the organization that has given me so much. I encourage those who can give even a small amount, or the gift of their time, to volunteer at events to help another service dog team become one.

The Power of Community

Planting the Seeds of Hope and Renewal

In March, the Bay Area was challenged with severe storms and winds. During that time, Operation Freedom Paws experienced the loss of trees, tents, gazebos, and outdoor furniture. We were proud of how our team came together to safeguard everyone on the property and grateful that our structural foundation remained sound. But the landscape of the property looked a bit different. Our founder, Mary shared, "we were in need of some TLC to restore the peaceful environment our clients have come to call their safe place." Thanks to the power of community, three wonderful organizations/businesses stepped forward to give new life to the property and enrich the space where our clients and their families come to train and heal: The Home Depot, GrowBIG...ogh, and the Gilroy Gardening Group.

Spearheaded by project leads Wes Buntman (Operations Manager Morgan Hill), Veronica Pippenger (Store Manager Morgan Hill), and Loretta Souza (Store Manager Salinas), the Home Depot Foundation provided a grant enabling new supplies and raw materials to be ordered. We were honored that Home Depot then selected OFP to be their first quarter Team Depot Beautification Project. Over 50 dedicated volunteers from stores across the Bay Area came together on May 12th for the project. These amazing volunteers worked hard to build planter beds, assemble picnic tables, stain outdoor furniture, lay tan bark, and put up a big, beautiful gazebo on our patio.

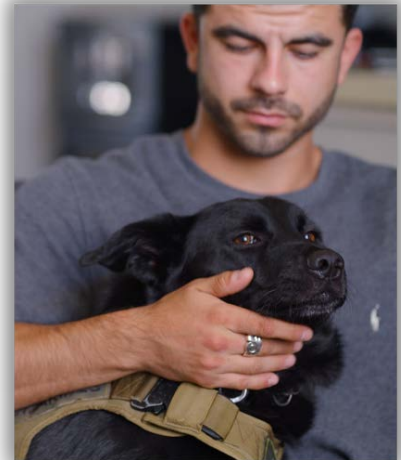
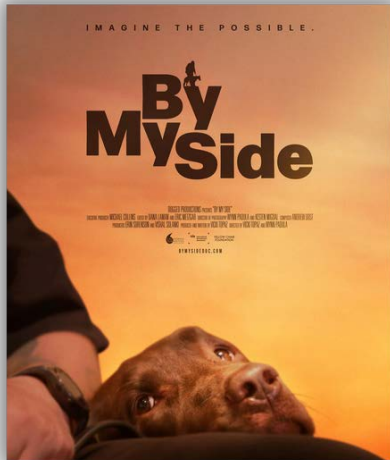
The owners of GrowBIG...ogh, Lia and Chris McGrowin, donated and personally delivered 4 cubic yards of their beautiful Max Yield, high-quality, premium organic soil. GrowBIG...ogh Organic Gardening & Hydroponics was established in 2015 and has a 5-star rated store for gardening supplies and expert advice. Their nourishing soil proved to be the perfect foundation for the work that would follow with the Gilroy Gardening Group.

On April 22nd, Gilroy Gardening Group held a plant sale at The Red Miller Barn where they donated proceeds to benefit our mission. Led by their co-chairs, Stacy Chavez and Rich Yamashita, the committee's hard work, big hearts, and green thumbs made the event an impressive success. The Plant Sale Committee further donated beautiful vegetables, herbs and flowers that found homes in our Victory Garden and throughout our property. These talented gardeners didn't hesitate to roll up their sleeves and dig right in adding planter box liners, distributing soil, and planting, planting, planting! There was so much thought and effort put into every planter box. Stacy Chavez shared, "We want to provide a place of tranquility ... a place where OFP clients can come, work in the garden and enjoy the fruits of their labors."



Mary shared our gratitude by adding, "Operation Freedom Paws is honored to live in and be part of an amazing community. To Home Depot, Gilroy Gardening Group Plant Sale Committee and GrowBIG...ogh, thank you for all of your time and donations to help facilitate the healing space at our center. On behalf of myself and all of our clients, our gratitude for showing the good and making a huge difference. We couldn't do this without you all." We want to extend a big thank you to our own green thumb and Volunteer Lead, Katie, for helping to organize the moving parts. We know OFP is just beginning to see what will take root and grow thanks to all of their collective efforts.

World Premiere of "By My Side": GI Film Festival San Diego Featuring the Healing Journeys of Our Veteran Teams



What a magical night! It was incredibly special to see the cast of the documentary short, "By My Side", come together for the World Premiere at the GI Film Festival San Diego. The film features three of Operation Freedom Paws veteran clients and their families bravely sharing their stories of pain, fear and time lost with loved ones. All three find new hope in a place they never thought to look - in the heart of a faithful service dog. Cast member Kim shared, "you can't just hide your feelings and emotions because these darn dogs, they know. They can smell it; they can feel it. But she (Artemis) knows that I am her partner, and I am her job."

A true labor of love by talented filmmaker, Vicki Topaz and her production team, we want to thank them for bringing these powerful stories addressing PTSD and secondary trauma to the screen and the cast for courageously sharing their personal journeys. "By My Side" was well received with accolades from both festival attendees and its organizers. The film touched hearts with the message that help and hope are within reach. Topaz shared, "one mission of "By My Side" is to heighten service dog awareness, empowering veterans to learn more about and seek out service dogs, an evidence based therapeutic option for PTSD helping them to live fuller lives, revitalize family relationships and get back out into the world." "By My Side" received an Honorable Mention for the Founders' Choice Award. It was also wonderful to see filmmaker Vicki Topaz and cast member Emilio with his service dog Samson interviewed on "Good Morning San Diego" KUSI News.

We are incredibly proud of the filmmakers, cast, crew, advisors, and supporters who have made "By My Side" possible. Our founder and executive director, Mary Cortani, served as a key advisor on the film. Thank you to everyone for your hard work to champion support for the mental health of veterans and their family members. To learn more about "By My Side", go to bmysidedoc.com

Event Highlights

The OFP 12th Annual Charity Golf Tournament

What a great turn out we had for our 12th Annual Charity Golf Tournament and Awards Luncheon on Friday, May 12th. It started out a little chilly but turned into a beautiful day. We're so grateful to the amazing sponsors, golfers, in-kind donors, clients, board members and volunteers who participated. Thank you to the mayor of Morgan Hill, Mark Turner, for being a great host, and the Coyote Creek Golf Club team for skillfully managing the tournament. We were thrilled when Kayla presented our board member, Diane Jimenez, with a generous check from Coyote Creek Golf Club's Shamrock Tournament to benefit our mission!



A special shout out to our Ball Sponsors the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA), IBEW Local 332, and The Joint Electrical Fund (JEIF), our Ace Sponsor Cline Glass Contractors, our Condor Sponsors: LWG Construction, Weston Miles Architects, The Ford Store Morgan Hill, Le Pooch Grooming and Boutique, Pinnacle Bank (Morgan Hill), Family Pet Care Center, and Ravenox, our Albatross Sponsors: Morgan Hill Life, Gilroy Life, and Woodcraft Hardwood Floors, and "Beat the Pro" with Pearl Rojanapeansatith sponsored by Backswing Golf Events. Thanks to everyone's support, the golf tournament raised funds to enable us to welcome a new team and their family into the program.



OFP 2023 Upcoming Events

When You Participate, You Make a Difference!

AUGUST 5, 2023 - 12TH ANNUAL OFP "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, enjoy wine from across Santa Clara Valley, live music, dancing, and auctions. Hosted at OFP Canine Education Center, tickets now available at pawswithpats23.givesmart.com.



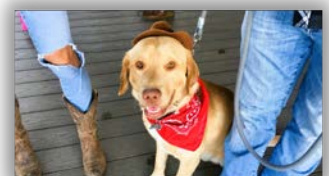
OCTOBER 14, 2023 - OFP 5th ANNUAL BOWLING TOURNAMENT

Whether you like to bowl competitively or just for fun, we've got an event that's right up your alley! You can join us at either 10am or 2pm to play in the USBC tournament or hit the lanes with friends and family! Bowlers can win great silent auction and drawing items and enjoy delicious baked goodies. Hosted at Morgan Hill Bowl, tickets will go on sale soon.



OCTOBER 21, 2023 - NATIONAL PETS FOR VETS EVENT

Experience a day filled with great wines, live music, drawings and a silent auction. There will even be a dog costume contest with prizes, so bring your dogs and get creative! Hosted at J. Winston Winery, free entry.



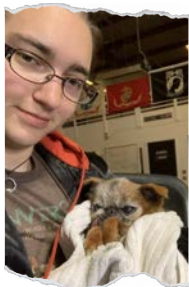
OFP Daycare & Boarding Kennel Talk

Get to Know the Awesome People Who Care For Your Dogs

What you already know about our kennel staff is that they are extremely hard-working and OFP Daycare and Boarding would not be possible without them. Their dedication, skills and heart-forward attitude help to empower our mission, all while providing stellar care to our furry guests around the clock. But now is your chance to get to know a little more about who they are as people, in their own words. This edition features some of our senior staff - thank you for sharing team! We look forward to bringing you more kennel talk profiles in coming newsletters. We hope you enjoy getting to know these special people better.

- Renee, Director of Operations

LINDSEY - ASSISTANT MANAGER



I have been with OFP since 2021. Before that I worked in wildlife rehabilitation, focusing mainly on birds of prey and bobcat kittens. I have loved animals all my life. I grew up watching Animal Planet and one of my biggest heroes as a kid was Steve Irwin. I have had a variety of pets over the years: birds, rodents, and reptiles, and always dogs, big and little. I was born and raised in Texas and rode horses throughout my childhood. I am an artist and creative writer and have a variety of creative hobbies I enjoy in my spare time. I love working at OFP and getting to know all the different dogs and their personalities and quirks. I make a habit of winning over any shy or nervous dog as I want them all to be as happy and comfortable as they can be while staying with us.

KATALINA (KAT) - KENNEL TECHNICIAN SUPERVISOR

I have been with OFP since 2020 and have enjoyed every second of it. I have worked with such an amazing team throughout the years and learned so much. OFP has been there for me, not only in helping me become a well-trained Kennel Tech, but also with my education. Because I have such supportive members by my side, I can finally go and pursue my Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology. An interesting fact about me is that I have been dancing since I was seven and got lucky enough to perform at the Golden State Warriors and 49ers stadiums. I like to binge watch shows. My favorite food is spaghetti and my favorite place to eat is Jardines in San Juan Bautista.



MIKE - KENNEL TECHNICIAN SUPERVISOR

I first found OFP in late 2020. Pandemic restrictions were in place, and I wanted a job that would get me even further away from people (I prefer dogs anyway). However, as I learned more about dogs, I found myself learning more about people too. Dogs are a reflection of who we are. With the environment created at OFP, it quickly became my home, and the dogs and people became my family. I'm grateful to have a job that allows me to give others that same experience.

ADAM - KENNEL TECHNICIAN SUPERVISOR

Hello, my name is Adam and I have been with OFP since September of 2021. I work with all the dogs and the rest of the team as a Kennel Technician Supervisor. I've really enjoyed my time here so far. It's been great meeting so many wonderful people and wonderful dogs. I really like learning about math and science. I went to Gavilan College for a few years before the pandemic, and I plan to go back to a university to complete my degree in aerospace engineering. I used to work as a student researcher in a chemistry lab at SJSU, so coming to OFP has definitely been a big change, but a very welcome one. I love working with dogs. They're incredibly smart and full of love. Every dog is truly unique but one thing they all have in common is how much positivity they add to the world.



OFP Daycare & Boarding Kennel Talk

Get to Know the Awesome People Who Care For Your Dogs (cont'd)

KHY - KENNEL TECHNICIAN WEEKEND LEAD

Working at OFP has been an awesome experience. My co-workers all have a great sense of humor, are super friendly, and are always willing to give a helping hand. Before working here, I was frying my brain to mush doing data entry, so it's been a nice change of pace to enjoy my job. I mean, what is there not to like? I play with dogs all day. For my future plans, I'm excited to go to U.C. Davis to study digital media.



KEVIN - KENNEL TECHNICIAN

I wish I knew about OFP a lot sooner. I am happy I found out about it and cherish the bonds I have made with the dogs that come and go here. During my time off, I spend time with family, play video games, watch movies, and like to go for walks at Pinto Lake County Park. I used to play soccer, but I just love watching it now. And this is my dog, Toby.

CODY - KENNEL TECHNICIAN EVALUATOR

I have been with OFP since 2016. I began just as a young furry guest, but through the years, I have become a highly trained canine companion. I now assist Human Resources in interviewing every Kennel Technician applicant. I also help at the front desk greeting new pups and welcoming them to the facility. I am part of a large "littles" group and thoroughly enjoy sunbathing and romping in the yard. My co-worker Kennel Techs are great to work with and I have made a ton of furry friends over the years. OFP is my home away from home.



California Department of Veterans Affairs

Mary Cortani Recognized as a Trailblazer











California is home to nearly 163,000 women veterans, making California the second largest population of women veterans in the country next to Texas. As a proud member and advocate for this community, our founder and executive director, Mary Cortani, was humbled to be one of only six statewide California Department of Veterans Affairs' 2023 Trailblazer Award recipients.

"CalVet's Trailblazer Awards were created to honor and recognize California women veterans and servicewomen who've made significant contributions to their communities and have reaffirmed their perseverance and dedication to duty through community engagement," said Virginia Wimmer, Deputy Secretary for Women Veterans Affairs. "Trailblazers are women who have served their country or are currently serving and making an impact by enhancing the lives of other veterans, veteran families, or veteran caregivers."

These remarkable individuals were honored at a reception on Monday, June 12 at the Sheraton Grand Sacramento Hotel. This is the 11th year since the award's inception and the ceremony coincided with the 75th anniversary of the day President Harry S. Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act into law on June 12, 1948. This legislation enabled women for the first time to become permanent members of the U.S. military. Mary shared, "it was an honor to be seen as a female veteran, helping disabled veterans by providing service dogs to them to live the best lives possible." Thank you to the California Department of Veterans Affairs for recognizing the careers of Mary Cortani and the other five recipients, Irma Hagans Cooper, Elena Kim, Rhonda Murphy, Connie Owens and Latia Suttle, all of whom are blazing a trail to champion support for their fellow veterans.

There are so Many Ways to Help

Thank You!

<p>DONATE DIRECTLY - Make a donation directly on the Network for Good website that comes straight to Operation Freedom Paws (OFP). To donate Scan the QR Code or check out the website: https://donatenow.networkforgood.org/OperationFreedomPaws</p>	
<p>MAIL-IN DONATIONS - CHECKS BY MAIL Send a check to Operation Freedom Paws at our mailing address:</p>	<p>777 First Street PMB 515 Gilroy, CA 95020</p> 
<p>DONATE YOUR CAR - Donate your car to Able Auto Charity Donation Corp. They will take your car IN ANY CONDITION! Every donation contributes in some small or big way, and it all adds up to make a difference. Call 408-963-9588, scan the QR code or check out their website: https://www.ableautocd.com</p>	
<p>MAKE A LEGACY DONATION - Making a legacy or memorial donation to OFP makes a lasting difference in the lives of disabled clients and their families. Contact Mary Cortani directly to discuss making these donations to OFP. Phone: 408-683-9010</p>	
<p>USE THE CHEWY GIVES BACK WISH LIST - Purchase items to donate to OFP via our Chewy Gives Back Wish List, and they're delivered directly to us. Scan the QR code or check out their website: www.chewy.com/g/operation-freedom-paws_b75331095</p>	
<p>MAKE A STOCK DONATION - To donate stock to OFP, you'll fill out a stock transfer form from your brokerage, which is the financial institution that manages your stock assets. In the form, you'll list information about the stock you want to donate and which charity you want to donate to. Call for more info (408) 683-9010</p>	
<p>USE THE AMAZON WISH LIST - Purchase items to donate to OFP via our Amazon Wish List, it's delivered directly us. Scan the QR code or check out their website: www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/1SDVEUAF75ZYM?pldnSite=1</p>	
<p>MAKE A LIFE INSURANCE DONATION - OFP can be named as the beneficiary of a life insurance policy, which is revocable by the donor. It can be named as the owner and beneficiary of a new life insurance policy, which is irrevocable. Also, an existing life insurance policy can be changed to include OFP as a beneficiary or to transfer ownership of the policy to the nonprofit.</p>	
<p>WE WELCOME CORPORATE GIVING - Whether a corporation wants to make a matching donation to an OFP donation goal or if the corporation encourages employee donation match programs, OFP encourages community corporation partnerships in giving. For info call and ask for Marketing: (408) 683-9010</p>	
<p>CONSIDER A RECURRING GIFT - When you commit to a consistent recurring donation schedule, this is considered a recurring gift. One benefit of recurring gifts is that they help give our nonprofit an expectation of consistent, predictable cash flow, enabling us to make forecasts into funding and scheduled payments. It also allows you to spread your contribution out over time. To set up a recurring gift, Scan the QR Code or go to the donation website: https://donatenow.networkforgood.org/OperationFreedomPaws</p>	
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