

# Wounded veterans get "paw-some" help from Hero Dogs program

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A Hero Dog named Maverick helps a veteran with the grocery shopping. Photo: Hero Dogs.

A new school year has just started. No, not yours -- we're talking about the newest class in the Hero Dogs training program. These special pups were handpicked before they were born. They will train to become service animals for wounded military veterans.

## Puppies Learn Simple Commands And Special Skills

At 8 to 12 weeks old, the puppies leave their mothers. They join Hero Dogs in Montgomery County, Maryland. There, they are house-trained. They learn to walk on a leash and are taught simple commands. Over the next year or so, the puppies go everywhere with their trainers. That way, they can become comfortable around people and other animals.

At 18 months, the puppies learn special skills. Injured veterans often have trouble doing things that used to be easy. Sometimes they have difficulty walking up stairs, shutting doors or turning light switches off and on. During this part of training, the puppies learn to do these types of tasks and more.

## Matching Dogs With Veterans

Puppies change as they grow older, just as you do. Some might be better at one job, so they will get added training in that area. Usually, by the time a dog turns 2, it is matched with a veteran. The dog is assigned based on its energy, behavior and skills. It is matched with a veteran based on the vet's experience, lifestyle and needs.

After pairing, each team spends a few weeks together. They spend time in a cabin at the Hero Dogs facility, learning to live together. Over the next several months, they get more training to make sure everything is going smoothly. If things go well, they graduate from the program. The dog then goes home with the veteran.



## Gracie Finds A Home

For one dog named Gracie, it took a couple of tries to find the right home. She was 4 last year when she was paired with Air Force veteran Michael Harris. He served in the Vietnam War from 1969 to 1970. Today, he lives in Waynesboro, Virginia.

Gracie is a spunky Labrador retriever. She is named after Rear Admiral Grace Hopper, who was a pioneer in computer technology.

## **"Not Your Typical Lab"**

"She's not your typical Lab that runs into a room and loves everybody," Harris says.

But Gracie quickly adjusted to Harris. She learned ways to help him manage the stress caused by his military service, a problem that surfaced five years ago.

Now, if Harris has a nightmare, Gracie will climb into bed and nuzzle him. If that doesn't wake him, she can turn on the light switch.

## **Gracie Helps Harris Ease His Anxiety**

Harris sometimes gets worried in crowded or noisy places. One of Gracie's most important skills is distracting him when this happens. She nudges him with her nose or puts her head in his lap. This helps him focus on her and eases his anxiety.

In public, Gracie wears a red vest that says "Hero Dogs" and "Service Dog in Training." At restaurants, she sits under the table. On airplanes, she sits under the seat in front of Harris. Other travelers usually don't know she's there. Sometimes, though, the flight crew recognizes Harris and Gracie. Then they might call out, "Hey, Gracie's coming on board!"

## **Some Become Therapy Dogs Instead**

More than 55 dogs have entered the Hero Dogs program since it started in 2009. The most recent class has five puppies, ranging in age from 11 weeks to 23 weeks. Their names are Bert, Nick, Jaz, Raymond and Bartley.

Every now and then, a dog has health problems or other complications. This might keep it from becoming a service dog. Some become therapy dogs instead. They provide comfort and love to people but are not trained to do specific tasks.

## **It's A Special Life**

For Hero Dogs and other service animals, it's a special life.

"Gracie was waiting on me, and I was waiting for Gracie," Harris says. "I can't imagine being without her."

