

PAVING THE WAY FOR RETURNING VETERANS

Nikki Jardin • Spot Magazine

“IT’S
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THE ATMOSPHERE at LexiDog Boutique and Social Club conveys a typical scene: dogs happily playing together while their people relax and chat. But this isn't a typical doggie play date, as Michelle Nelson, CPDT-KA notes the time on the clock and announces to the group that it's time to get started. People take hold of their dogs, some older, some still very much puppies, and form a semi-circle. It's time to get to work.

This evening is dedicated to furthering the training of the younger dogs for a special kind of service. These working dogs will eventually be placed with veterans suffering from mental and/or physical disabilities they've sustained during their service. The class is provided by Nelson as part of the organization PAVE, Paws Assisting Veterans, founded in 2010 as a way to improve the lives of veterans returning from war.

Nelson started the group based on family experiences. “My son is in the Navy and recently returned from Iraq. Veterans have given so much for us that I decided to specialize in training service dogs for them.”

As a longtime trainer of service dogs, Nelson has seen transformations born from the bond

that forms between people and the dogs who serve them. Currently PAVE has seven puppies in training, with two graduating this month.

The organization relies on puppy raisers to socialize the dogs, taking them to work, school, and on daily errands. PAVE board member Melissa Leto-Dixon says this type of socialization is essential. “They have to work on training in crowds, since public access is important for a service dog.”

In the classroom, the puppies are working on walking past one another without getting distracted. The sounds of clickers fill the room, along with calming reassurance and praise from their handlers.

One of them, Bethany Andrews, has been training service dogs since 1998, primarily with Guide



Dogs for the Blind. Andrews is currently working with a PAVE puppy for the first time, and finds the training very comprehensive. “For vets, mobility is often more of an issue than sight, so these dogs are learning to do things like open doors, drawers, and turn on light switches.”

PAVE is funded entirely through donations and grants. The average cost for raising and training each dog runs about \$15,000, which includes veterinary care and other expenses, a cost PAVE does not pass on to service members, who receive their dogs free of charge.

Melissa Leto-Dixon, who comes from a family of military veterans, loves being part of this work. “It's such a simple way to give back,” she says.

To learn how to become a puppy raiser, or to donate time or resources to PAVE, visit PAVEUSA.org.



Top left: PAVE dogs, Asher, Alicia and Jay.

Left: Lt. Nelson works with training a future service dog on how to work with people in wheelchairs.

Above: Navy Lieutenant Ken Nelson upon his return from Iraq with several PAVE dogs. Lt. Nelson sponsored a service dog to support his comrades in arms. Photos © Michelle Nelson



Nikki Jardin is a Portland-based freelance writer who loves to write about people dedicated to making the world a better place for all beings.

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