

Nonprofit Trains Service Dog For Injured Veteran

Denise Fleischman • July 30, 2010

An injured Iraq War veteran has a new service dog, thanks to Paws 4 Liberty, a nonprofit service dog organization based in suburban Lake Worth.

Paws 4 Liberty Executive Director Heidi Spirazza, an occupational therapist and riding instructor at the Vinceremos Therapeutic Riding Center in Loxahatchee Groves, recently placed Sgt. Paul Thurman, a wounded veteran from Fort Worth, Texas, with Lucky, a three-year-old yellow Labrador retriever.

Lucky will provide seizure alert, night terror wake-up assistance, help in picking up dropped items and general life enrichment for Thurman.

Lucky started his training as an arson detection dog in Miami. He didn't care for arson sniffing duty, but took to other parts of his training with ease. Spirazza was contacted when it was determined that Lucky would make a good service dog.

After working with Spirazza and trainer Marti Hohmann, Lucky was assigned to a soldier for one year. That soldier underwent a spine operation and recuperated to a point that he no longer needed a service dog, so he returned Lucky to Spirazza.

Thurman contacted Independence Fund, which put him in touch with Paws 4 Liberty. Thurman applied and was accepted for a service dog. "Matching Lucky with Sgt. Thurman required evaluating the traits and strengths of the dog with Thurman's needs," Spirazza explained.

Thurman was in town for two weeks this month to train with Lucky as they got to know each other. "He is going to be a big help to me. He'll be there for me all the time. Lucky is an awesome dog," Thurman said.

Spirazza said she believes that the pairing will work out well.

"In the two weeks since Paul has been working with Lucky, I have observed a close bonding," Spirazza said. "I believe that Paul will have an enhanced daily life with the aid of Lucky to help with physical and emotional support."

Thurman's wife Tanya said that every day she spoke to him on the phone, he seemed more upbeat and happy. They have five children. Thurman returned home July 29 with Lucky.

It takes \$20,000 or more to fully train a service dog. Paws 4 Liberty is accepting volunteers for dog care, kennel maintenance and office work. It also is taking donations for sponsorship of a soldier and to help buy dog care items such as leashes, food and cleaning supplies.

For more information, visit www.paws4liberty.org or call Spirazza at (561) 644-6292.



Lucky with Army veteran Sgt. Paul Thurman, Paws 4 Liberty's Heidi Spirazza and (back) certified professional dog trainer Marti Hohmann.