

Nonprofit provides life-changing support through service dogs



by ANNETTE JOYCE

Sometimes all it takes is a four-legged furry companion to change, or even save a life. That's what veterans Ben Miller and Keith Harrison discovered after connecting with their beloved service dogs, Felipe and Elliott.

A resident of Kernersville, Miller, 67, came home from the Vietnam War a different person.

"He didn't go out and wouldn't have anything to do with other people," Miller's wife, Susan, said. "He was very protective of (his family)."

Dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) as a result of his service in the Iraq War, Harrison, 51, not only avoided venturing outside his Thomasville home but had attempted suicide to

free himself from his pain.

Life took a turn for the better when the two soldiers met their designated service dogs, Felipe and Elliott — two golden retrievers whose comfort and support allow their owners to lead normal lives.

With Felipe by his side, Miller is no longer afraid to go out. He speaks to graduating nurses about PTSD and spends time teaching school children about service dogs and the etiquette to follow when approaching these dogs and their owners.

Miller said the first time he realized how far he had come was when he attended an event at the Charlotte Speedway and found himself in a crowd of over 40,000 people.

"Felipe took over and pulled me through the group, sort of knocking people aside," Miller said. "He's released me to be human again. He reaches up to me and mitigates my disabilities."

Elliott has played an equally important role in Harrison's life.

"I'm here today because of him," Harrison said, with his faithful dog lying patiently at his feet.

"(Because of my injuries) I had to retire about 30 years early. It was hard for

▲ Ben Miller (seated, left) and Keith Harrison with their service dogs, Felipe and Elliott, and (standing, L-R) Susan Miller, Viki Matthews and Brandi Quinn play a major role in the success of maCares and faith Cares Service Dog Support program.



me to go out in public. Elliott gives me a push and makes me want to help others."

Like Miller, Harrison spends time reading to children. Having Elliott along gives him the perfect opportunity to talk about service dogs and the impact they have on the lives of people who need the assistance the dogs provide.

Both Miller and Harrison have found additional support in working with maCares and faith Cares Service Dog Support program, a local nonprofit organization that helps people with service dogs take care of their animals.

According to Brandi Quinn, the nonprofit's president, "the program relieves the financial burden of caring for a service dog so that veterans, children and adults can focus on living full and productive lives with the aid of their service dogs."

maCares and faith Cares currently work with 13 people – 10 veterans and three civilians – and their service dogs. The civilians include a young girl with juvenile diabetes, a first responder who suffers from PTSD and a young woman

who has mobility issues.

Quinn said the nonprofit covers a complete range of expenses related to the service dogs, such as veterinary care, grooming, food, training and recertification.

"Taking care of a service dog is expensive," she said. "We do what we do so that our folks can focus on taking care of themselves."

In addition to their corporate and community sponsors, maCares relies on smaller, more traditional methods of fundraising. For instance, they've taken the bake sale to a new level.

"We can have a bake sale and make \$700," chuckled Viki Matthews, a maCares board member.

Many of the fundraisers are food related. For instance, there are hot dog sales and donations from restaurants and food trucks. In addition, the group sells T-shirts and notecards and is currently working on its first ever run/walk which will take place on Saturday, Sept. 9, at Country Park in Greensboro.

Along with ensuring financial support

is available, these fundraisers also give the sponsored dog owners the opportunity to get involved and give back.

"Our veterans are our biggest supporters and volunteers," Quinn said. "We couldn't do this without them. They're our family."

Harrison, Miller and the other dog owners are eager to tell the maCares story and share the impact the organization has had on their lives.

Harrison explained it best.

"maCares has given me a sense of family, a renewed passion for helping others, and most of all they help prolong the life of my best friend in the world – my service dog Elliott," he said.

want to know more?

For more information on registering for the upcoming walk/run on Sept. 9 or how to get involved with the organization, visit macares.org or email wecare@macares.org.

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