



Program pairs veterans, dogs to help PTSD symptoms

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When a cabinet full of pills couldn't help wounded Marine Sgt. Paul Martin find healing, healing found him — in the form of a 2-year-old black Labrador named Lia.

Martin, who is from Raleigh and stationed aboard Camp Lejeune, received a traumatic brain injury in 2005 on his first deployment to Iraq. Three years and two deployments later, he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, which for him came with a slew of debilitating symptoms, including nightmares, auditory hallucinations, agoraphobia and depression. Martin tried to commit suicide twice and, at one point, was trying to keep his worst symptoms at bay with six or seven different medications.

While at a Veterans' Affairs Medical Center in Martinsburg, W.Va., Martin heard from a caseworker about Paws4People, a nonprofit that provides those in need with service dogs, using prison inmates to help train and rehabilitate the dogs and ready them for ownership.

The organization had recently branched out with a Paws4Vets program, and Martin's caseworker suggested he apply for a dog. In an April visit to a West Virginia prison where the dogs were being

trained, Martin met Lia and made an immediate connection.

"I think it was probably when I saw her," Martin said. "She was probably more antsy than the other dogs I met. That's probably what I like about her the most."

When Martin returned to Camp Lejeune's Wounded Warrior Battalion, where he is now stationed, he tried to commit suicide again. But now his treatment team and Paws4Vets staff had an incentive to offer him: "The deal we made with him when he came back was, 'Don't commit suicide, do what your psychiatric team wants you to do and you can spend more time with Lia,'" Terry Henry, executive director of Paws4People, said.

Over the next five months, Martin would make monthly trips to West Virginia, spending about a week with the dog each time and venturing out to get reaccustomed to public situations and familiar with working with Lia.

Henry said there is no fixed amount of time before a wounded veteran is ready to take home a service dog.

"There's no science to it, it's pure art and science," He said. "It's more collective assessment between our medical evaluation team and the service member or veteran's psychiatric team. You just come to this subjective opinion that they're ready."

Martin finally received Lia to keep this week.

Between first meeting the dog and taking her home, Martin was able to overcome the worst of his

depression; stop taking all but minimal medication, such as mood stabilizers and occasional sleeping pills; and spend time in public places again, steadily growing in confidence.

“They would call it a dramatic turnaround, from September up until now,” Martin said.

Now, Lia and Martin are in the “umbilical phase,” never separated by more than a leash length for the next two weeks, Martin said.

A certified psychiatric service dog, Lia is trained to wake him from nightmares, nudge him back into reality if he begins to have a hallucination and assist in social situations.

Paul is the fourth service member to receive a dog from Paws4Vets. Another Camp Lejeune resident, a Navy corpsman, is working to receive one in coming months. The organization is also working to start a new program at Georgia’s Ft. Stewart Army base.

“When you can get a guy like Paul within five months to basically turn his whole life around and put so many symptoms behind him because of a black Lab coming into his life, that’s a pretty cool thing,” Henry said.

To learn more about Paws4Vets, visit www.paws4vets.org. Read more about Sgt. Paul Martin at www.paul-paws4vets.blogspot.com.

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