

By Joshua Hatch, USA TODAY

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Prison Pups Serve Those Who Served

OTISVILLE, N.Y. — The state prison here sits among green rolling hills in southern New York. It is a medium-security prison, so it's not unusual to see inmates in green prison garb shuffling from one building to another. What is surprising is to see an inmate walking his dog.

Gilbert Molina, serving 15 years to life for a 1991 murder, is a dog trainer in Puppies Behind Bars, a program that prepares dogs to work as aides to disabled veterans. This fall, Molina, 38, is wrapping up 20 months of training with his latest pup, Faith. As they amble down a long hill along a chain-link fence topped by razor wire, he praises Faith: "That's a good girl, mama. That's a good girl!"

PHOTO GALLERY: [Puppies behind bars](#)

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Soon they'll have to say goodbye. Faith is going to Colorado, where she'll meet James Kent, who has been battling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) since he returned from Army tours in Iraq and Afghanistan four years ago.

For former soldiers such as Kent, who are imprisoned by disabilities, and for inmates such as Molina, imprisoned by past deeds, the program offers new hope. Molina and Faith have been together since April 2008, when she was a "little snot-nosed, 8-week-old puppy," he says. She is the third dog Molina has trained. He has decorated his cell with pictures of her and the others.

Since 1997, when former youth services official Gloria Gilbert Stoga read about a similar program and decided to copy it, Puppies Behind Bars has run 600 puppies through the program and placed about 350 into working service. It started out training dogs for the blind but now prepares them to help disabled veterans or work for police agencies sniffing for bombs.

'Making me a better person'

Prisoners are great puppy raisers, Stoga says, because "they put their all into each and every dog." Unlike professional trainers, she says, prisoners "have a real need and desire to prove they can do something right. ... Here is a chance for someone to say, 'You succeeded.' "

"There's a level of responsibility that's involved, like having a little baby," says Eric Jenkins, 37. Convicted in a 1992 fatal shooting, Jenkins got into the program in 2007. He's training his second dog, a 3-month-old golden retriever named Skamper. "It compels you to extend yourself and not think only of yourself. I have to think about him first," Jenkins says, stroking Skamper's head.

An inmate in the program — who still has to do a regular prison job — spends 24 hours a day with the dog. He must learn basic veterinary care, keep a journal and be an assistant to a primary trainer for at least six months before he gets his own puppy.

Of the 500-plus inmates at Otisville, 19 are part of the puppy program, currently training 11 dogs. Each dog has a primary trainer; the other participants provide backup.

The program, in six prisons in three states, relies on breeders to provide Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers because, Stoga says, their size enables them to do things such as turning on lights, and their friendly dispositions help break the ice with strangers.

The cost of raising, training and placing a dog is \$26,000, funded by private donations and grants from non-profit organizations. A donor who gives \$3,000 gets to name a dog and receives progress reports from the inmate trainer.

Professional trainer Carl Rotans, 44, meets with the Otisville inmates and their dogs every Wednesday in Building 110, the Canine Center, to check progress and give feedback and tips.

The dogs are trained in more than 80 commands. "Block" tells a dog to lie down in front of its owner to keep anyone from getting too close, something that can cause stress for a veteran with PTSD. "Guard my back" tells the dog to stand guard behind its owner. The dogs also learn to turn on lights and call 911 using a pre-programmed phone.

The program is as much about the inmates as it is about the puppies. It is "making me a better person," Jenkins says, adding that he's "having a direct impact on society."

Stoga says Puppies Behind Bars selects applicants with long sentences who can make the two-year commitment. A trainer is given nothing for his work — no promise of a shorter sentence or an easier prison job. "This has to be something you want to do," Jenkins says. It's a serious responsibility, Molina says: "You're taking care of a living life here."

The prisoners say they get one big benefit: the dogs' unconditional love. Molina recalls how Faith got him through a rough time after he had been denied parole. "I was able to focus on the dog, and little by little, I forgot about the time. ... It was almost therapeutic."

'A hidden disability'

Therapy is what the program is about for veterans such as Kent, too.

Kent, 35, was skeptical about Puppies Behind Bars. He thought a dog would add more stress to his life. As he describes it, he has been angry, depressed and anxious for four years. His work clearing improvised explosive devices in Iraq left him distrustful. He blamed himself for injuries to men under his command. Once, he tried suicide. That didn't keep the Army from sending him on a second tour, this time to Afghanistan, where an ambush left him with a traumatic brain injury.

Kent's injuries aren't apparent. He's tall, slim and muscular. "It's a hidden disability," the ex-soldier says in slow, measured phrases. "My memory is off. I have severe depression and anxiety."

He rubs his hands nervously. "In large crowds, I get very antsy and have a lot of anxiety."

"He has severe migraines, night terrors and flashbacks," says his wife, Jennifer, 36. "He used to talk to anyone, but now he has no friends. He doesn't really want to do anything."

She told Kent their marriage was on the line. His behavior was getting to be too much for her. She and his therapist finally persuaded him to apply for a dog.

Saying goodbye

Molina sits at a desk, writing his last update on Faith. In two days, she'll be sent to the Denver area, where a staff trainer will introduce her to Kent for two weeks of getting to know each other. Molina begins, "Dear Faith," drawing a small heart in place of the dot over the "i."

"My last (entry) is telling her to behave, to do the things she needs to do. Walk properly on the leash, don't eat too much — things like that," he says.

Contemplating his final farewell, he says, "I don't care how tough a guy says he is, when it comes down to it, you shed a tear."

Love and belly rubs

In early October, James and Jennifer Kent fly to Denver and meet several other veterans. They'll all be paired with graduating service dogs. The first dog Kent sees is Faith. "She looked just like a dog I had as a child," he says. He is thrilled they will be paired together.

Within days, Kent is coming out of his shell.

"He was interacting with people," Jennifer says. It is the first time in years she'd seen him smile.

A month later, Jennifer leafs through Molina's journal, which includes Faith's baby teeth and dozens of entries detailing her life in Otisville. As Jennifer's three daughters kiss and cuddle the dog, she flips through the journal and stops on one page. "My favorite entry's on one of the last pages," she says.

"There's no way to prepare for the day when my best friend has to leave," Jennifer reads Molina's words. "My main concern is for Faith to receive all the love possible. I know she will bond with the person and will do whatever, just to please. I hope she makes life easier for that person and that both of them live life to the fullest. Make sure she gets plenty of belly rubs, because she loves that."

