

News 10 ABC (Albany) - Special Report: Inmates train puppies to help wounded veterans

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FISHKILL, N.Y. (NEWS10) – Dogs are known for being remarkable companions and are smart enough to learn skills to serve the brave men and women of our country, but where some of them gain their training is the last place you'd expect.

Every afternoon at an open field in Fishkill, you can find dogs playing fetch.

"I received him when he was eight weeks old," Glenn Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez and 20-month-old Dixon have an unusual bond.

"It's actually a very big responsibility to have the puppy," he said.

It isn't your average dog park. Beyond the field stands barbed wire, and Rodriguez is a convicted murderer serving 26 years to life at the Fishkill Correctional Facility.

Carl Rotans is the senior trainer of Puppies Behind Bars.

"They have to do something right to give back to society to make up for past deeds," he said.

That's where the puppies come in. With treats in hand, prisoners – who committed a range of crimes from homicides to aggravated assault – show their compassionate side.

As Rodriguez trains Dixon, you see the softer side of a man you may expect to see a lot of negativity. But his barriers break down as he shows a little tender love and affection to the only friend he knows that won't judge him for his past.

"I know I'm viewed in a certain way by society based on decisions I've made in the past," he said.

"You can't hold an eight-week puppy in your arms and not feel anything," Rotans said.

For two years, prisoners who qualify for the Puppies Behind Bars program work with the puppies to transform the dogs into service animals for true American heroes.

"I know the time is coming where he's going to be serving a greater purpose," Rodriguez said.

That purpose unfolded at the Puppies Behind Bars graduation ceremony at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women where the puppies turned service dogs were matched with a U.S. veteran like Staff Sergeant Joshua Cota.

“I didn’t realize I had an issue until I was out of the military,” he said. “I noticed I was more angry, less social; used to be very outgoing.”

Cota was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after serving multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and has been dealing with barriers of his own.

“Seeing wounded service members was like seeing your brother or sister hurt,” he said.

Cota was matched with Marcus. With the help of an inmate, Cota worked on training Marcus to be his new companion.

“They’re not inmates to me. They’re people with their own personalities,” Cota added. “Sometimes good people make bad decisions. You have to pay the adult consequences.”

“It makes me feel like I can make a difference despite the fact that I was here,” Rodriguez said.

It’s a chance to contribute rather than take from society.

“It’s been beyond miraculous what these people have done,” Cota said. “They’ve put their love and dedication and heart into this dog for three years.”

Only to say goodbye.

As Marcus gave one final doggy salute to the people that raised him, he’s now ready for a life of service and support.

The Puppies Behind Bars program is privately funded, and inmates earn the right to be a part of the program. The dogs that don’t make it through the program go on to be explosive detection dogs.

Rodriguez said when he is released, training dogs is something that he’s seriously considering.