



Jim and Diane Oliver say their service dog, Lady, has helped put their lives back on track.

Reaching those *with* PTSD

Service dogs offer new hope and perspective for those suffering from multi-layered disorder

BY NANCY SILCOX

PHOTOGRAPHY • DWIGHT STORRING

An unfamiliar sound, coming from her living room, startled Diane Oliver. “It sounded like someone was laughing in there, but I couldn’t guess who,” she says. “And I was sure it couldn’t have been my husband, Jim. He hadn’t laughed for over 40 years.

But it was Jim. “He was laughing at something silly that our new service dog, Lady, was doing.”

Lady, a chocolate Labrador retriever

supplied by National Service Dogs in Cambridge, had arrived at their Waterloo home that day, trained to assist the Olivers in their recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“Both of us had carried a burden, a sadness, an anxiety around for over 40 years,” says Diane. “We didn’t know what it was; doctors and psychiatrists didn’t know. All Jim and I knew was that something wasn’t right.”

That “something” was undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder.

PTSD can wreak havoc in the lives of military personnel such as the Olivers as well as first responders such as police, firefighters and paramedics. Characterized by high levels of anxiety, deep depression, nightmares, flashbacks, phobias and a feeling of isolation, the disorder was called “shell-shock” during the First World War.

Diane describes the effects this way: “For me, PTSD makes everything serious, a matter of life and death, and I saw everything as a battle-to-the-end to make things right.

“Lady’s special skill is recognizing when we are fighting the battle going on in our own heads and bringing us back to the present and lightening the mood. She brings us back to the present where we can do the hard work of applying the skills we have learned to stay in the present.”

Jim, who served in the Armed Forces

until 1990, fought his own battles. “My reaction to this event was to start drinking. Di somehow put up with me and we survived – just living ... not really enjoying life – until Di met the people at (National Service Dogs).”

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Specialists at the Parkwood Institute in London, Ont., traced the Olivers’ troubles back to Oct. 23, 1969.

Jim was onboard the HMCS Kootenay for just one day, a member of the staff for the squadron commander who was evaluating naval exercises in the North Atlantic. Suddenly the gearbox exploded, sending a fireball and thick smoke through the ship. Nine sailors died, with dozens injured. It was Canada’s worst peace-time naval disaster.

Meanwhile, Diane, a cryptographer at the Halifax Naval base, took the coded calls

from the ship as it burned.

“It first came as a flash message, indicating trouble,” she recalls. “Then the details came in, one letter at a time.”

Diane calls the Kootenay explosion “the most stressful time of my life” as she watched the words come together so slowly – waiting to find out if Jim was one of the casualties.

Jim had escaped injury, but his trauma didn’t end with the explosion. After the dead and wounded had been removed from the Kootenay, the ship was towed to Plymouth, England. Due to Canadian Naval regulations at the time, the bodies of the dead sailors had to be either buried at sea or buried in England. None was returned to Canada.

Over a period of three weeks, the ship was made seaworthy to return home to Halifax. During that time, uninjured sailors were

housed in the burned-out Kootenay.

More than 40 years later, in 2011, Parkwood medical personnel connected the Olivers’ history and their ensuing psychological maladies. The specialists diagnosed PTSD and recommended counselling and medication.

But Diane had learned of another support for individuals with PTSD – service dogs. A computer search led her to the National Service Dogs in Cambridge. “I called them right away and told them our story,” she says.

For Jim and Diane Oliver, that call was the first step in starting a new life.

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National Service Dogs, pioneers in the training of dogs to assist with autism, has been developing its PTSD program since 2011. The Olivers were among their first clients. Today it offers the only accredited

NATIONAL SERVICE DOGS

• National Service Dogs is a not-for-profit organization that trains certified service dogs to work with children and families living with autism and those with post-traumatic stress syndrome. Other programs include canine-assisted intervention, which matches dogs with professionals in various treatment disciplines, and companion dogs, which places dogs with children with disabilities.

- Dogs are provided free to approved clients.
- National Service Dogs receives no government funding, so relies on donations from the public and corporate sponsors.
- The training facility is at 1286 Cedar Creek Rd., Cambridge. Website: www.nsd.on.ca

PTSD service dog training school in Canada.

Program director Tamara Leniew reports that since the program began, 15 service dogs have been paired with persons diagnosed with PTSD. Thirteen have gone to military veterans; two have been placed with police officers.

Leniew addresses the low number. “It takes approximately two years after the puppies are born to develop a service dog.”

The cost is about \$30,000 over the dog’s working life. Recipients of the dogs pay no fees. Their only cost is the dog food and veterinary care for the new member of the family.

National Service Dogs receives no government funding and relies on support from private sources. Scott Maxwell, of Wounded Warriors Canada, indicates his organization serves over 1,500 former military personnel yearly and over the

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past two years has donated \$100,000 to National Service Dogs.

Leniew says Labrador and golden retrievers are the breeds of choice as PTSD service dogs due to their high intelligence, gentle disposition and trainability. All dogs must meet international standards set by Assistance Dogs International.

PTSD dogs learn how to assist individuals in a number of ways. First and foremost is the promotion of activity.

“The dogs are young and active, and they pretty well force the individual to get out of the chair get some exercise,” Leniew explains.

Jim Oliver counts on Lady for this. “Before we got Lady, I’d disappear inside myself for long periods of time. But now if 9 a.m. comes and I haven’t been out for a walk with her, the dog will sit by a chair and stare at me until I get ready to go out,” he says, laughing.

Trained to sense anxiety and tension in their owners, PTSD dogs will give gentle nudges to re-direct negative emotions. “When I’m upset, I always fold my arms over my chest and my voice gets louder,” Diane says. “As soon as Lady sees this, she’ll move right over to me and poke me with her nose under my arms. She helps me get over myself.”

Diane, who ended her career in the Armed Forces shortly after the 1969 ship accident, has also been plagued by sleep problems. Lady has been trained in “nightmare interruption.”

“Some PTSD dogs will pull covers off the bed with their teeth,” she says. “Others will turn on a light when they sense their human is in distress.”

Diane sums up the invaluable assistance that Lady has given both her and Jim. “I’ve gone from being a person with a problem, to a person with a dog.”

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Jim McLean, who served in the Canadian Armed Forces in Cyprus, the Golan Heights and Bosnia, was diagnosed with PTSD in 2007, also at Parkwood Institute in London.

“Bosnia was where things fell apart for me,” he says. “When you see a mass grave of bodies floating in a river it affects you for sure.”

He looks back on those black days after he retired from service. “I hated even to go outside my house; I hated crowds; I was angry and I couldn’t keep a job.”

When McLean applied to National Service Dogs, he was put on a waiting list. “I was told it could be two years. The dogs are carefully raised and trained and that takes time.”

In 2013 McLean welcomed Elvis, a black Labrador retriever, to his Kitchener home. “And we bonded immediately,” he says, scratching Elvis’ ear.

A troubling symptom of Jim’s PTSD was “hyper-vigilance”—anxiously checking or scanning the area for danger. It’s a common outcome of ex-military personnel who have spent years in a protector role.

McLean recalls his pre-Elvis state of mind in public places.

“Even walking through a mall made me panic. I’d last maybe five minutes before running for the car.”

Now with Elvis purposefully providing a “perimeter barrier” in anxiety-causing situations, the hyper-vigilance has decreased markedly.

“Even if we are in a restaurant eating, Elvis will station himself beside me so that people who walk by have to go around him.”

McLean says there have been a few bumps in the road convincing people that he is allowed to bring his dog with him into buildings, so when he read in the newspaper that MPP Michael Harris was advocating

for a local autistic child who had been denied his service dog during school hours, McLean contacted Harris to share his experiences. It struck a timely bell.

“After talking to Jim and doing some digging, I realized that there was a real inequity in the law regarding disabilities,” says Harris, MPP for the Kitchener-Conestoga riding. “I found that while blind persons using service dogs are given entry to public places without question, those with invisible disabilities such as Jim McLean’s, are not.”

These two situations and others like them prompted Harris to act. Months of investigation and discussion culminated with Harris’ Bill 217, which received first reading in the Ontario Legislature on June 8, 2016. If passed, Bill 217 will afford all disabled persons with service dogs the same rights as blind Ontarians under the Blind Persons Rights Act. 

“Lady’s special skill is recognizing when we are fighting the battle going on in our own heads and bringing us back to the present.”

DIANE OLIVER

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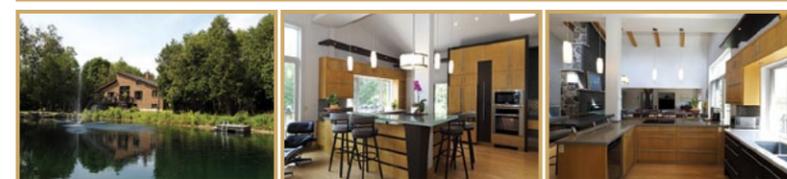
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