Veteran Helps Create Everyday Miracles

'I’m not ashamed to say that my dog helped me through many rough patches when my husband’s dementia began to manifest'

Sep 13, 2021

Eugenia “Gene” Thornton is **#StillServing** as a Life member of VFW Post 6483 in Milford, Delaware, along with Dolly, her certified therapy dog.

Thornton served in the U.S. Army for 27 years. She was deployed to Korea and Germany and during Desert Storm. After retirement, she received a 90 percent disability rating and continues to deal with ongoing pain. Taking care of Dolly helps her stay active, but Thornton needs the emotional support Dolly provides, as well.

“Dolly gives me a reason to get up and get moving,” said Thornton.

“Who among us has not hugged and cried into a pet’s warm body when we encounter life’s disappointments? I’m not ashamed to say that my dog helped me through many rough patches when my husband’s dementia began to manifest.”

Dolly and Thornton’s journey as a therapy dog team has involved visits to the Delaware Veterans Home, where Thornton’s husband of 40 years lived before he passed away in August 2020. While her husband was their main reason to visit during that time, he wasn’t always able to see them. This led to therapy dog certification to spend time with others.

“I was able to bring sunshine to many residents. The trip was never wasted because my dog interacted with many people every time, even if my husband was not our primary focus,” Thornton recalled.

“Plus, if the visit went badly, as can be the case when your loved one has dementia, Dolly was always there to help get me through the sadness…I’m not sure I could’ve visited my husband for five years if I didn’t have the dog to support me. Sometimes, a therapy dog gives

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE
200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719
info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

support to those being visited as well as those on the other end of the leash."

After visiting 200 times, Dolly earned the title "Therapy Dog Excellent" which is now part of her official registered AKC name. Thornton enjoys seeing how Dolly's presence and interaction provides physical and emotional benefits to patients such as decreased blood pressure, stress and anxiety and increased happiness, activity and communication.

"Residents will stretch and reach beyond what they might otherwise do just to engage a therapy dog or move themselves quicker than normal in their wheelchairs to be near the dog. Residents who normally sit off to the side alone will often form a loose group around a therapy dog," said Thornton.

"I've seen residents who have not spoken for quite some time actively engage a dog in conversation…For residents who are conversant, a therapy dog will evoke fond memories of dogs they once had. One resident rescued a dog from Italy when he served in World War II. Every time we visited, he told the story about that dog."

Thornton and Dolly are affiliated with the National Capitol Therapy Dog Association and PAWS for People. In addition to the Delaware Veterans Home, they've been to the Medical Examiner's Office at Dover Air Force Base, de-stress events at local colleges during exam week and Delaware's Legislative Hall when a session is winding down.

"We've also been to Community Health Clinic events where the medically underserved receive shots and dental exams. We participate in the annual Delaware Veterans Stand Down, mainly hanging out where the VA is giving vaccines," Thornton stated.

"These two public events are often also attended by our governor and state or federal elected officials. Do I need to tell you who gets more attention from the crowd? Hint: she's red, weighs 50 pounds and has four legs."

Thornton says that without Dolly, she wouldn't be able to give back to her community. She's glad to have the opportunity to share the bond she has with her dog and be a help to others on a regular basis.

"When you are part of a therapy dog team, you are used to everyday miracles."

To find out more about the VFW's #StillServing campaign or to share your story, visit vfw.org/StillServing.