

15 Ways My K9s For Warriors Service Dog Has Helped Me

By a K9s For Warriors Graduate



I was a hot mess before I got my service dog. I am so thankful I followed through on getting a service dog because she has changed my life significantly. I had tried everything and found myself sinking deeper and deeper into isolation and didn't know how to fight it. I am a veteran with PTSD and the anxiety and depression that I experienced was paralyzing. I was a captive of my own body.

I wasn't a believer of the power of dogs initially. My only frame of reference was a pet as a child who jumped on me and had no boundaries. Given my state of anxiety, anything that came at me was too much. I had no idea what service dogs were nor what they were

capable of until I got Onyx. They are a special breed of dog trained for months if not years by people with emotional and financial investments in both animals and people with disabilities.

I discussed my situation with a fellow veteran who suggested I apply to the K9s For Warriors organization. I applied to the program and was immediately supported by the President of the organization, Shari Duval. I shared my anxiety about the process and she lovingly calmed my fears by helping me understand how the dog will help me. But ultimately she asked me to trust that she would take good care of me and all the other veterans who came through the program.

I spent three weeks in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida in May 2013 learning how to use my service dog out in the community. The dogs were already trained, they pick the dog for you, and you bond and train more with the dog while you are there. I had tears of joy when I met Onyx. It felt like we had been reunited as opposed to meeting for the first time. I also met four other women veterans at the program who have become my friends for life. Since owning Onyx, I have come to realize how much she has changed me over the course of time.

1. **K9s For Warriors:** I learned that people truly care about veterans and not everyone has an ulterior motive. The staff, volunteers, and supporters invest a lot of love, time, money, and energy.

2. **Friends:** I met four other women veterans who understand me and are my friends for life. I am engaging with family and friends again now that my PTSD is more manageable.
3. **Safety:** Try coming at me now that I have a service dog. Good luck with that. I trust her intuition and she knows when something is making me feel uncomfortable or anxious. She is protective.
4. **Sleep:** Because Onyx makes me feel safe & protected, I sleep better, do not have nightmares and night sweats as often, and when I do feel vulnerable, she is a great cuddle buddy.
5. **Shopping:** She accompanies me when I go anywhere which enables me to get out in the community again. I feel safe with Onyx and more willing to try new things. She is my anti-anxiety.
6. **Independence:** I can travel unaccompanied again. I depended on my husband for safety before I got my service dog. Onyx has given me and my husband freedom. Our relationship is symbiotic.
7. **Love:** I was living in survival mode and my emotions were blocked. Onyx helped open up my heart and feel love again. I was way more defensive and hypervigilant prior to owning a service dog.
8. **Gentleness:** As a result of the love that Onyx elicited, it helped me become more gentle. K9s For Warriors taught us that gentleness works better with the dogs. It's improved my relationships.
9. **Fitness:** I always loved to walk. I stopped because I was fearful of walking alone. Onyx needs to be walked so it motivated me to get back out there. She is the reason I can wear headphones again. I didn't wear them for years because I needed to know what was going on around me at all times.
10. **PTSD Services:** Onyx gave me the courage to seek out programs to help heal my PTSD. I was willing to go somewhere for longer periods of time because my service dog would be with me.
11. **Equine Therapy:** The healing power of dogs helped me understand the healing power of horses. They both operate in much the same way: building trust, fostering gentleness, and lowering anxiety.
12. **Emotional Regulation:** Onyx doesn't act the same when my PTSD is triggered, over stimulated, or fear sets in. She literally looks worried which pulls me back in the here and now and helps me regulate my emotions. When I notice her reaction to my symptomatology, it cues me to connect with her, which helps the PTSD wave dissipate sooner rather than later. She lowers my blood pressure.
13. **Motivation:** She is a dog that needs to be taken care of. Even if I am having a bad day, I have to feed & water her, take her out for breaks, and pay attention to her. This activity keeps me going every day and motivates me to keep going and take care of myself too. We both need a walk.
14. **Joy:** I smile and laugh every day at something that Onyx does. She is much different at home then when we are working. She acts like a playful puppy because this is her down time. I love to look at her cute little face and observe her unique personality traits and the healing power of animals.
15. **Life:** Onyx helped pull me back into life. I was not in the here and now, I was emotionless, I was living in survival mode, and I was crumbling. I had been out in the real world and wasn't sure I wanted to be a part of it anymore. Onyx helped me focus on the little things, the simplicity of life.

Onyx has a story of her own and ultimately was saved to save me. I will forever be grateful to the veterinarian who saved her and her sister Chinook's life, the folks who housed her and trained her to become a service dog at the Service Animal Project, the dog trainers at K9s For Warriors who gave her the finishing touches, and all the staff and volunteers at K9s For Warriors who invest in us and these hero dogs. K9s For Warriors pairs rescue dogs with veterans. It's a match made in heaven.