

# SENTINEL

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Huntington, New York

[Golf.VetDogs.org](http://Golf.VetDogs.org)

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EST. 2003

**AMERICA'S VETDOGS®**

Sean Shields was born in Staten Island, New York, one of seven children, but grew up in the Poconos, Pennsylvania.

Life in a large family meant that “my parents couldn’t pay for college for us,” he says. “We paid our own way,” which meant that when he wasn’t in school, he was working. From the time he was 14 years old until he joined the Navy at 20, Shields worked at Mount Airy Lodge, a resort in the Poconos.

## Sean Shields

# Paying It Forward in Thanks

“I was working while I was going to school. Every vacation I would go home and work. Then I would go back to Penn State and have my side job while I was going to school.”

By October of his junior year, he was burnt out: he hadn’t been to classes since August and decided to drop out. The school refunded his tuition money, and his college career was over, at least temporarily. He went to a Navy recruiting office and enlisted.

The next step was to call his parents and tell them. “That was the hardest conversation I ever had,” he says. “I said, ‘I just quit school and I’m joining the Navy.’ And tears are running down my face because all my other brothers and sisters had gone to school.”

There was silence for about 30 seconds, “and then my dad says, ‘Good. We didn’t think you were ready for college anyway,’” Shields recalls. “And I was like, ‘OK, maybe I am making the right decision.’”

Shields’s father was a Navy veteran, and although the two had butted heads in the past, when Shields joined the Navy, “it actually brought us closer. It was something we shared.”



*(continued on page 6)*

# A Message From Our President & CEO



As we mark more than a year since the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in the United States, I'm proud of how America's VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation adjusted and adapted to our "new normal" so that we could continue to train and provide guide and service dogs to people with disabilities.

While we've reduced the size of each service dog class for the protection of our students and staff, we're holding them more frequently, which means that we've been able to continue to train and place dogs at close to our pre-COVID pace. We have learned much during this period, and this new knowledge will help guide our future efforts as we seek to increase capacity.

Once a veteran or first responder graduates with their assistance dog, we continue to ensure the team remains safe and healthy through our aftercare services, whether by email or phone or in person. For example, during the crisis in Texas in February, our team in consumer services reached out to our Texas graduates to check on them. We received multiple responses from our graduates in the state who were appreciative of our concern.

We're happy to announce our latest puppy with a purpose corporate partner: Deloitte, an international audit, consulting, tax, and advisory services company. Deloitte provides services to Fortune 500 companies worldwide. Puppy Benny is being raised by a Deloitte staff member who has raised several service dog puppies.

We're proud to welcome Andrea McCarren to the boards of America's VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation. Andrea is a vice president and chief content officer at PenFed and is raising Ace, PenFed's own puppy with a purpose. Andrea is a former journalist and investigative reporter, whose beat included Washington, DC, and the White House, and she taught broadcast journalism at Harvard University. We look forward to her contributions to our mission.

Every year, we host a breakfast reception to acknowledge members of Congress for their bipartisan support of the Wounded Warrior Service Dog program. While COVID safety protocols meant that this year we had to go virtual, we're looking forward to meeting again in person soon. VetDogs graduates retired US Air Force Staff Sgt. Stacy Pearsall, retired US Navy FMC HM3 Joseph Worley, and I participated in Zoom calls with several members of Congress and their staffs to talk about our programs and thank them for their support.

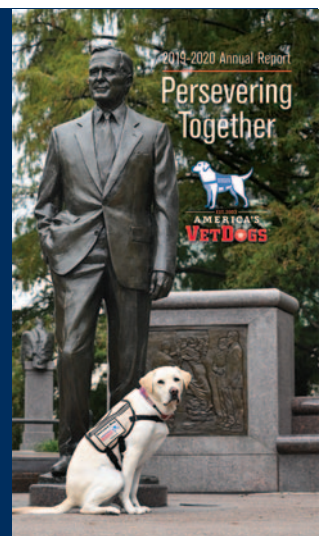
We have many exciting fundraising opportunities coming in 2021, from our VetDogs run and dog walk virtual race series to our annual golf outing to our second annual #GivingBarkThursday, an online social media event, slated for July 8. As we return to normal, we thank you for standing with us through this crisis and for helping us to change lives.

John Miller  
President & Chief Executive Officer

We're pleased to report that once again we have achieved Platinum status on **GuideStar** for 2021. Platinum status is GuideStar's highest rating and demonstrates our commitment to sharing our goals, strategies, and how we measure our impact on people's lives.



If you'd like to receive a copy of America's VetDogs' annual report for its fiscal year 2020, email us at [Info@VetDogs.org](mailto:Info@VetDogs.org) and we will email you an electronic version. Or if you'd prefer, we can send you a print copy via postal mail. The annual report is also available for download at our website, [VetDogs.org](http://VetDogs.org).



# A Perfect Place for Puppy Outings

In our prison puppy programs, inmate handlers raise a puppy during the week. They teach housebreaking, basic obedience and preliminary service dog skills, and take the pups with them wherever they go in the prison. However, it is vital that pups be exposed to the outside world while they are young.



Photo courtesy Mark Tyler

*"Farm Day" at the Okies' farm for weekend puppy raisers (photo taken before COVID). Photo courtesy Mark Tyler*

Mark Tyler is our field representative who oversees the prison puppy program at Osborn Correctional Institution in Connecticut. In addition to working with inmates during the week, Tyler also leads puppy classes for our weekend raisers.

Weekend puppy raisers pick up the pups on Friday and integrate them into their family life, returning the canines to the correctional center on Sunday. The pups get exposed to cars, buses, and trains, sporting events, crowds, shopping, restaurants, etc.

Shortly after we placed our first puppies in Connecticut, Tyler began looking for places to hold the group obedience classes. "We hold Saturday puppy classes in different public spaces to help raisers safely and successfully expose a service dog candidate to the world outside the prison walls," he says.

However, while public places are good for certain activities, sometimes they can be full of distractions that make it more difficult for other lessons, such as helping raisers work with a new pup or for teaching basic handling techniques. "These are better accomplished in a distraction-free setting where the raiser can

concentrate on instruction and the young dog can focus on the handler," Tyler says.

He wanted a location "that was out of the elements, was convenient to my raisers, available when I needed, and was free!"

With those goals in mind, Tyler approached Susan Okie, the owner of Horses & Hounds, a pet supply store in Granby, Connecticut. Horses & Hounds opened in 2006 and sells dog and cat food and accessories, as well as livestock feed and supplies for cows, horses, sheep, goats, pigs, and many other domestic and wild animals. The store is women-owned and operated.

"My first thought was to ask [Sue] if she knew of any horse barns in our area that might consider allowing me to use their space," Tyler says. "When I approached her she quickly offered up the warehouse of her store. Not only does it provide a suitable place to hold a group

class, but it is attached to her store, which then allows us to put the skills taught in the warehouse area right into practice in a store setting."

He continues,

"Sue does things that help others without asking for anything in return, and she doesn't seem interested in letting others know of her good deeds. She just does it."

Okie is modest about her involvement in the VetDogs mission, but her connection to people with disabilities is personal. "I have a quadriplegic son, so I know how valuable these dogs are," she says. She knew Tyler as a customer and neighbor, so "when Mark approached me about using our space, I immediately answered yes!"

In addition to the warehouse space, Tyler says that Okie has also supported the program through product donations. "I explained what items we often are in need of in the prison and she took the list and posted it in her store, asking patrons to make a monetary donation and then purchasing the items for us and donating them."

*(continued on page 4)*



# Puppies With a Purpose



## Update

### Meet Benny Our Newest Corporate Puppy with a Purpose



We're happy to announce our newest corporate puppy with a purpose: Benny! We've partnered with Deloitte, which provides audit, consulting, tax, and advisory services to Fortune 500 companies around the world. Benny will be raised by Deloitte staff member Deborah Golden, the US Cyber & Strategic Risk leader for Deloitte Risk & Financial Advisory. Deborah has raised several service dog puppies in the past, so Benny the puppy will be a familiar sight to her colleagues and clients.

You can follow Benny on Instagram @BennyServicePup and Twitter.

### Brooks (@wbaltvpuppy)

Brooks, the puppy with a purpose raised on air at the NBC affiliate WBAL-TV in Baltimore, also returned from his puppy raiser to begin his formal training as a future service dog. Brooks is working on "Shake." The purpose of this task is to give the handler an opportunity to engage with the public so that focus is on the dog rather than their disability. While the dog interacts with the public, it is also maintaining its focus on the handler.



## A Perfect Place *(continued from page 3)*

Okie and her husband own a nearby farm, and she has opened up her farm so Tyler can hold puppy classes there.

"I do a 'Farm Day' class from time to time with the weekend raisers," he says. "It's probably their favorite class." Raisers descend on the Okie farm and the puppies get a chance to be around horses, sheep, goats, chickens, and donkeys.

When most departments of correction temporarily suspended the puppy programs to ensure the health and safety of inmates and visitors during the pandemic, many of our puppies went to live full-time with their weekend raisers. (Although the majority of the prison programs are still on hiatus, facilities in Connecticut and Florida have since reopened.)

"We were looking for some way to keep advancing the dogs in training while they were being housed full time in their weekend homes," Tyler says. "I again approached Sue and she allowed me to use her facility four days per week."

Tyler set up locations where puppy raisers could meet him to drop off their pups for the day. He would then train the pups at Horses & Hounds in the morning before returning the dogs to their puppy raisers in the afternoon.

"This allowed us to keep training and work directly with each dog during the shutdown," he says.

Okie says her customers love to see the dogs and the weekend raisers working at the store. "It's great to be able to make the community aware that [America's



*Above, Mark works with a prison puppy at Horses & Hounds.*

*Right, Mark's daughter, Grace, helps with training.*

VetDogs] exists," she adds. "I love helping out and love to see the progress these dogs make."

For more information on our prison puppy program and how you can become a weekend puppy raiser, please visit [PrisonPuppy.VetDogs.org](http://PrisonPuppy.VetDogs.org).

For more information about Horses & Hounds, visit [HorsesandHounds.com](http://HorsesandHounds.com). ★



Photos courtesy Mark Tyler



## Captain (@CapsPup)

After growing up in Washington, DC, as the Washington Capitals' team dog, Captain has returned to America's VetDogs headquarters to begin his formal training as a service dog for a disabled veteran or first responder. He's already hard at work with his trainer, Kim. In this exercise, Captain is learning how to retrieve items and bring them back to his handler. This task will be useful if his future handler drops something that they can't retrieve on their own.



## Tori (@nyislespup)

The New York Islanders' puppy with a purpose Tori is also working on her formal training as a future service dog and shows off her new service dog vest.

Puppies **Spike** (Atlanta United), **Scout** (Monumental Sports & Entertainment), and **Ace** (PenFed) are still with their puppy raisers.

You can follow all our puppies with a purpose on their individual Instagram pages or @AmericasVetDogs.

# Welcome Our ★ New Teams ★



# Sean Shields *(continued from cover)*

## In the Navy

Shields did his basic training at the Orlando Naval Training Center in Florida in 1992, and after graduating boot camp, he was stationed in Pensacola, Florida; Monterey, California; and then Edzell, Scotland.

He was working as a cryptologic technician – communications, but the job was transitioning to computer networking, “and I wanted something different.” He became interested in linguistics and applied to “cross-rate” (change career fields).

He had to take the Defense Language Aptitude Battery, which tests applicants’ ability to learn a foreign language. Shields passed and returned to Monterey to learn Arabic.

“The school at DLI [Defense Language Institute] was 52 weeks of pure hell,” he recalls. All his instructors were native speakers, and “after two days, they said, ‘No more English.’”

Students were required to pass 15 unit tests. “If you failed one test, you went to the class that was behind you to try and catch up.” If you failed again, you were out of language school. “Arabic and Chinese Mandarin had a higher attrition rate than the Navy nuclear program,” Shields says, “but I loved it, though. I loved every minute of it.”

After graduating from DLI, “I was able to read, write, speak, and translate Arabic,” he says. “I still even dream in Arabic sometimes.”

Shields spent two years at the US Naval Station in Rota, Spain. “I was never stationed on ships,” he says, “because there was no need for an Arabic translator.” Instead, the linguists would go out on assignments when needed, either boarding ships at the pier, flying in by helicopter, or transferring between ships on the open water by inflatable boat.

As a cryptologic technician interpretive first class, Shields was responsible for translating and interpreting foreign-language data, but he also took part in on-site operations to catch oil smugglers coming out of Iraq before the second Gulf War.

He laughs as he recalls: “The officers I worked with would look at me and go, ‘Just stand there and look stupid,’ and I’m like, ‘I can do that. I’m good at that.’”

The boarding team leader would try several options to see if they could get the ship’s captain to respond in English, and all the while, Shields would be observing the interactions between captain and crew.

Eventually, if there was still no cooperation, Shields would be told to speak to the captain in Arabic, so he would realize that the team knew everything that had been discussed.

Next, Shields spent a year at the US Naval Forces



Photo courtesy Sean Shields

*Sean's graduation from the Defense Language Institute in 1993. Sean is in the back row, on the right.*

Central Command in the Middle East. “I was actually stationed in Bahrain on 9/11,” he says. After an overnight duty shift, he remembers waking up in the afternoon of September 11 and watching the news of the World Trade Center on fire. “Then the second plane hit,” he recalls. “And my job got very interesting after that.”

He served in Dubai for three months, where he provided translation between US Navy coastal warfare units and the Dubai police and United Arab Emirates Navy. “I also did some translation with personnel at the UAE Coast Guard station.”

For the last three years of his naval career service, Shields was stationed at Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia, in charge of 120 Arab linguists when Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced.

## Adjusting to a new life

During his time in the Navy, Shields visited about 30 countries, deployed on surface ships multiple times, and even spent two six-week deployments on submarines. He planned to be career Navy and retire after serving 20-plus years.

However, in 2005, “my back and my knees gave out,” he says. Unable to deploy in-country or onboard ships, his only option was to go before the medical review board to determine the extent of his disability before he was medically retired.

Shields also developed an autoimmune disease, which he believes is related to anthrax vaccines he received in 1999 when he deployed to the Gulf region.

After his retirement, Shields went back to school, got his bachelor’s degree in business administration and then an MBA. He went to work as the branch manager for a personal finance company.

However, his physical condition continued to worsen. “They call it chronic pain, but it’s not. It’s relentless,” he says. “I wake up with it, I go to sleep with it, I wake up three or four times a night with it. It never goes away.”

Shields’s physical pain began to affect his mental health, until one day in 2016, it got to be too much for

*(continued on page 8)*

# Ways to Give

There is never a charge to any of our applicants and students for their assistance dogs and training. All of our efforts are funded by individual donors, corporations, foundations, service organizations, and the occasional government grant. Throughout the pandemic, your support has been invaluable. The list below highlights the variety of ways you can help disabled veterans and first responders live without boundaries.

## #GivingBarkThursday – July 8, 2021

Follow us on social media for more details.

## Set up a Recurring Gift

Your monthly donation helps us plan with greater confidence so that we can continue to provide assistance dogs and training. There are many advantages to a

recurring gift: (1) it's easy & convenient; (2) your donation goes right to work; (3) you're in charge; (4) your gift goes further. Visit **Patriot.VetDogs.org** to learn how to set up your recurring gift.

## Text-to-Give

Text **VETDOGS10 to 20222** to make a \$10 gift or **VETDOGS25 to 20222** to make a \$25 gift. A one-time donation of \$10 or \$25 will be added to your mobile phone bill. No portion of any amount donated is held by participating wireless providers.

## Sponsorships

We have created a number of different sponsorship opportunities that come with a variety of recognition benefits for donors who want to honor or memorialize someone close to them. You can learn more at **Sponsor.VetDogs.org** or reach out to our development department directly at [Info@VetDogs.org](mailto:Info@VetDogs.org) with the subject line: Sponsorship Information.

## Community Fundraisers

Community fundraisers are a popular avenue for supporters to raise money for the programs of America's VetDogs. Virtual events have become increasingly popular as a fundraising option to ensure the health and safety of all involved. For information on planning your community fundraiser, please email Jaime McGrade, associate director of development, at [Jaime@VetDogs.org](mailto:Jaime@VetDogs.org).

## Planned Giving

Planned giving is your opportunity to protect your family, support causes you believe in, and leave a legacy that reflects what matters to you. For more information on our planned giving opportunities, please contact Amy Dash, philanthropy officer, at [Amy.Dash@VetDogs.org](mailto:Amy.Dash@VetDogs.org), for your own estate planning guide and to discuss your options.

## Amazon Wish List

<http://bit.ly/AVDWishList>

Did you know we have an Amazon Wish List? Now you can support America's VetDogs by buying supplies we need from Amazon. These non-monetary items are tax-deductible, but we do not receive donor or sender information from Amazon. If you would like a letter acknowledging your donation, please email us at [Alicia@GuideDog.org](mailto:Alicia@GuideDog.org). ★

## PsychArmor

We're pleased to share that America's VetDogs has been certified by PsychArmor Institute, a national nonprofit that provides free education and support for those who live, work, or care for veterans. Fewer than 7 percent of Americans serve or have served in the military, and most civilians are unfamiliar with military culture. PsychArmor courses are designed to help bridge the civilian–military gap. We felt it was vital that our staff attend these online courses to enable them to better serve our applicants, students, and graduates. These courses are taught by experts who are committed to educating the civilian community about military culture.



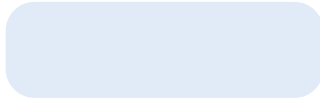
*Barrie Madasu (far right), volunteer services manager, presents Juliana L. (second from right) from Girl Scouts Troop 40539, Tappan Zee Service Unit in Rockland County, New York, with a certificate of appreciation for her hard work in fundraising to fulfill her goal of donating equipment to America's VetDogs. Juliana's uncle is a USMC veteran and retired New York City police officer, and a VetDogs graduate. Juliana wanted to support VetDogs for all the help VetDogs has given her uncle and other disabled veterans and first responders.*



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## Sean Shields *(continued from page 6)*

him. "I ended up driving myself to the Asheville [North Carolina] VA and spending a week in the psychiatric department." He switched his care to the Asheville VA, and he credits the care he received there with helping his recovery.



"If I hadn't gone to that VA, I wouldn't have Ranger [his service dog] and I wouldn't have had the amazing care I've had."

It was during a visit to an acupuncturist who was treating him for pain that he first found out about America's VetDogs. He was initially reluctant. "[Veterans]

don't do well with asking for help," he says, but after doing his research, he decided to apply.

Shields admits to getting anxious during the lengthy time between when he applied and when he was invited to class, but once he got the call, the waiting time "just melted away. It was worth every second to wait for him."

Shields's service dog, Ranger, has been trained to help him when his balance is off and he needs to lean against the dog. He also can provide support if Shields needs assistance in getting up from a chair or up and down stairs.

Equally as important is Ranger's effect on Shields's mental health. "I'm calmer now," he says. "I'm more hopeful and happier, and not as angry as I used to be." Ranger's impact extends to Shields's family. They've all remarked on the difference in him and how he reacts to life's daily ups and downs.

## Paying it forward

Shields decided that if he could, he would sponsor a puppy. When he received accumulated back pay after being declared 100 percent disabled, that's just what he did.

He named the black Labrador Retriever Kelbi, which means "my dog" in Arabic. It started as a joke. During language school, he says, "you could yell 'Kelbi!' and about 10 dogs would come running. Everybody who was going through Arabic would get a dog and they would name it 'Kelbi.'"

Kelbi the puppy is currently in the VetDogs PTSD service dog program at Blackwater River Correctional Facility in Milton, Florida; he's due to come in for his advanced service dog training later this year. His weekend puppy raiser is the same one who raised Ranger.

Life took a different turn than Shields expected, but he says, "Even knowing all the physical and mental health issues I have and what may have caused them, I would do it all over in a heartbeat." And even if he misses the Navy, he has a new comrade in arms by his side.

"Ranger is a lifesaver. He is my life." ★

### The VetDogs® Sentinel

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William Krol, editor.

It is available in print and on our website.

We welcome letters, articles, or photographs, but reserve the right to refuse any material.

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