

Are You “Abel”

John enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corp in 1997 as infantry division and was deployed to Iraq in March of 2003. John’s platoon was the first to be called in during heavy combat and they fought on the front lines for the war’s entire offensive phase. John spent his days enduring the austere conditions of combat and the loss of life on both sides.

Once home, John began a six year journey through drugs and alcohol in a desperate attempt to dull the memories but mostly to try to get the pain of war out of his heart. His mind would not let him forget the mayhem and carnage he experienced during his time in Iraq. He could not normalize his life, did not want to leave his house or hang out with friends. He felt like he was sinking into a deeper hole with each passing day. Realizing he was in trouble John sought help through the VA where he was diagnosed with extreme Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, Anxiety and a Mood Disorder.

John found our program, Dogs 4 Disabled Veterans during an on-line search. Our program provides service dogs and emotional support dogs to disabled veterans at no cost to the veteran. The program operates by placing rescued dogs with inmates at Martin Correctional Work Camp under a “train the trainer” program. Inmates and trainers work together in training the dogs through basic and advanced obedience as well as any behavior issues. Service dogs go on to a higher level of training specialized just for their intended owner.

John contacted Head Trainer, Lorri Volkman and very soon made a decision that would change his life. Seeing an opportunity to get John out of the house and moving toward normalizing his life, Lorri made an appointment with John to come and meet the dogs. John now admits that he was scared and nervous on that first day but so intrigued by the program that he kept his appointment anyway.

When John walked into the training room that day he was greeted by a very large and not so pretty hound dog named “Abel”. John went around the room to all the dogs but came back to pet Abel. John says he saw the horrific scars on Abel’s head and chest and knew he had been wounded and was drawn to him because of it. As the inmates shared Abel’s story of rescue John’s heart began to form a bond with him.

Abel was found wandering almost starved to death in forested area. He was big, thin and had very large ugly scars on his body from what we would later learn was an attack from a hog. He was afraid for people to touch him and would bolt or duck if anyone tried. He could get vocal about it if they pushed the issue. Little wonder that Abel was scheduled for euthanasia at the shelter where we found him. There was something about Abel that made us want to try to help him. We later learned that in Abel’s five years he was never allowed in a house, abused, used as a hunting dog and then abandoned by his owner. We brought him to the inmates who immediately began to teach Abel that being touched by a person and living in a house with them was a good thing. They worked through Abel’s behavior issues, patiently taught him basic obedience

and simply refused to give up on him. For the first time in his life Abel was with people who cared about him and he began to thrive. We realized how hard the inmates were working with Abel when we held a training session where we hugged the dogs. The dog that we once could not touch, allowed us to put both arms around him and hug him close for a few moments. Still, he had periods where he seemed depressed and listless and it tugged on everyone's heart.

John spent several hours with Abel that day. He allowed the inmates to demonstrate Abel's obedience and they worked with John showing him the correct commands and hand signals. John tells us his thoughts that day were that he and Abel were both wounded, physically and mentally. He understood exactly where Abel was and why he was having a hard time coming out of his shell. He felt connected to Abel and said he thought that together they could help each other. At the end of his time that day John wanted to know when he would get to bring "his dog" home and when John walked out the door it was obvious the bond he already formed with Abel.

We immediately realized something was different with Abel and began to see a change in him. Abel would stare at the gate watching for John's next visit, he began to eat better and started playing and acting like a young dog. He had a bounce in his step that we had not seen in him before and the depression seemed to melt away. It was obvious that no matter how much we loved Abel, John was who Abel chose to love. As John spent more time with Abel we watched the change in them both. John came readily out to visit with Abel and seemed more at ease talking with the inmates and trainers. In the preparation to bring Abel home, he moved to a larger house with a yard for Abel to play in, he began to leave his house more often to purchase supplies and visit Abel. His life was changing! Watching John and Abel together we realized they are two souls that found each other at just the right time.

John and Abel's story is a perfect example of why Dogs 4 Disabled Veterans was founded. It makes us all proud to be part of it!

