When Jo-Ann Rodriguez was young, she had one goal in mind: to join the military when she was old enough. With a family background steeped in military service – her great-grandfathers, grandfathers, and uncles served from World War II through Vietnam – it was no surprise that she would follow in their footsteps.

Rodriguez was 11 years old when one of her brothers enlisted in the Coast Guard and the other in the Navy. Every time they came home on leave, “they told me all the stories of military life, and I was so happy to hear them,” she says. “That’s what made me enlist.” However, it wasn’t the Navy or the Coast Guard that enticed her, it was the Army. “I’ve loved the Army life since I was a little girl.”

After high school, Rodriguez attended the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón of Puerto Rico, where she majored in communications and joined the Army’s ROTC program. (ROTC students maintain a regular college schedule while also taking courses specific to their future career as Army officers.)

When she graduated in 1988, she was commissioned as a second lieutenant.
As we navigate today’s ever-changing environment, we at America’s VetDogs are facing the same challenges as the rest of the country. I welcome your support and presence by our side to help us continue to fulfill our mission. Thank you.

Consistent funding is key to our planning, especially at this time, and monthly gifts will allow us to plan ahead with confidence. We created the VetDogs Patriots program for supporters who want to support America’s VetDogs on a recurring basis. You can find out more at Patriots.VetDogs.org.

In this issue, you’ll see examples of how important your continuing support is. Meet Army veteran Jo-Ann Rodriguez, whose plans to be a career Army officer were ended by health issues but who found new hope with her service dog; congratulate the facility dogs at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center who provide comfort to wounded veterans and their families; follow the puppies with a purpose who are training to become future service dogs. You’ll also meet our new partner, Monumental Sports & Entertainment, and Scout, Monumental’s own puppy with a purpose.

I’m proud to announce that Charles Bonomo has joined the boards of America’s VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation. Charles is the senior vice president and CIO of MSC Industrial Supply Co., with a long and extensive career within the national business community. We welcome his expertise and commitment to our missions.

We’re grateful for each and every one of you and the support you give to veterans and first responders with disabilities.

Give today at Donate.VetDogs.org and put your contribution to work right away.

Since our last issue of The VetDogs Sentinel, so much has changed in the world. I have been incredibly impressed by the collective spirit and passion of our volunteers, donors, and staff in response to this crisis so that we may ensure the safety and well-being of our community. Please stay healthy and safe. We are all in this together.

John Miller
President & Chief Executive Officer
We are proud to announce our first corporate puppy with a purpose. Monumental Sports & Entertainment has sponsored puppy Scout for America’s VetDogs. Monumental Sports is the owner of the Washington Capitals (hockey), the Washington Mystics (women’s basketball), and the Washington Wizards (men’s basketball) teams, plus their affiliated minor leagues; an esports league, and sports arenas. Monumental’s chairman and CEO, Ted Leonsis, and his wife, Lynn, will be the raisers for the pup. Scout joins “big brother” Captain, who is the Capitals’ puppy with a purpose.

“America’s VetDogs is thrilled to join forces with Monumental Sports & Entertainment with this program to raise a future service dog for a veteran or first responder with disabilities,” says John Miller, president & CEO of America’s VetDogs. “We are thankful to the entire organization for joining our dedicated group of volunteer puppy raisers to provide Scout with a unique and enriching environment that will ultimately mold him into a confident and well-socialized service dog.”

Ted and Lynn Leonsis have committed to donating $50,000 to sponsor the cost of raising Scout through America’s VetDogs.

For the next 14 to 16 months, Scout, a yellow Labrador Retriever, will receive basic obedience training and socialization to many different new and exciting situations. Scout will participate in MSE community events and attend select home games and other events.

When it’s time, Scout will return to New York where he will begin his advanced training with a certified service dog instructor through America’s VetDogs and will eventually be matched with a disabled veteran or first responder.

Corporate Puppy with a Purpose

Is your company looking for a way to build morale, get your employees involved in volunteerism, and foster goodwill and loyalty within your community? When you partner with America’s VetDogs in our corporate puppy with a purpose program, we will work together to raise a puppy to become a future guide or service dog for a veteran or first responder with disabilities.

You can choose to raise the puppy with a volunteer from your organization or we can provide a puppy raiser. For the next 16 months, your team will be involved in the puppy’s development as a future guide or service dog. At the end of that time, the puppy will continue its formal training with a certified instructor from America’s VetDogs and will be matched with a veteran or first responder with disabilities.

An added benefit to our partnership is an enhanced social media presence and media opportunities for you and your organization. And, ultimately, you will have helped a veteran or first responder with disabilities live without boundaries.

For more information on our corporate puppy with a purpose program and to learn more about the benefits, please contact philanthropy officer Karman Pun at 631-930-9095 or Karman.Pun@VetDogs.org.
Spike
Our First MLS Puppy with a Purpose
America’s VetDogs has partnered with Major League Soccer team Atlanta United for their very own puppy with a purpose. Atlanta United will be co-raising Spike, a yellow Labrador Retriever, in the Atlanta area for the next 14 to 16 months. Spike was picked up by the team president himself and flown in a private jet to his new home in Atlanta. Spike is the first future service dog to represent a Major League Soccer club, and you can follow him on Instagram at @atlutdpup.

Puppies with a Purpose
And don’t forget to follow our other puppies with a purpose on Instagram

Captain
Washington Capitals
@CapsPup

Brooks
WBAL-TV
@wbaltvpuppy

Tori
New York Islanders
@nyislespup

We partner with the HISTORY channel for their annual Take a Veteran to School outreach program, which teaches elementary school students about the significance of Veterans Day. VetDogs graduates share stories of their military service and how their lives have been changed thanks to their service dogs from America’s VetDogs.

Retired U.S. Marine Corps Major Chad Althiser addresses an assembly of fifth and sixth graders at Seely Place School in Scarsdale, New York.

Retired U.S. Navy Petty Officer Alex Valdes talks to the students at PS 64 in New York City.
This past February, we once again visited congressional leaders to discuss continued funding and support for our service dog programs.

Sully H.W. Bush (far left) was placed as a facility dog at Walter Reed National Medical Military Center in February 2019, and in honor of his first anniversary, he was promoted to the rank of U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman First Class (HM1). His fellow facility dog, Dillon (far right; also from America’s VetDogs), was promoted to staff sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps.

At Global Pet Expo in Orlando, Florida, in March, VetDogs’ veterans liaison and Iraq war veteran Joseph Worley and service dog Galaxie represented America’s VetDogs as guests of Bil-Jac, makers of America’s VetDogs Dog Treats. Bil-Jac will be introducing a new smaller-size VetDogs dog treat soon, which will be available at select Walmarts. The regular size treats will still be available nationwide.

Photo courtesy Walter Reed National Military Medical Center

In November, America’s VetDogs hosted its annual breakfast reception at the U.S. Capitol to thank congressional leaders for their bipartisan support of the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Program. VetDogs graduates U.S. Army veteran Tyler McGibbon, U.S. Navy veteran Joseph Worley, Army veteran Mary Cheyne, and U.S. Marine Corps veteran Alex van Bruekelen were also in attendance with their service dogs.

Congressman Jim McGovern, D-Worcester (left), is the sponsor of the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Act, which has received bipartisan support. McGovern is joined by retired U.S. Army Lt. Col. Mary Cheyne (middle) and her service dog, and John Miller, president and CEO of America’s VetDogs.
She remembers the first time she went home as an Army officer: “My brother had to salute me. He was enlisted, I was an officer. He didn’t like that,” she laughs.

Rodriguez’s first assignment was at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama. While her first choice was the military occupational specialty that dealt with defense against weapons of mass destruction (including chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons), there were only a few spots available.

Instead, she was offered the opportunity to become an ordnance officer. Her unit was responsible for ensuring that weapons systems were available and in working order when they were needed by troops on deployment during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

In addition to Alabama, Rodriguez was also assigned to duty stations in Puerto Rico and Mississippi, in both the regular Army and the Army Reserves.

The best laid plans...

Rodriguez loved being in the Army. “It was an exciting career,” she says. “I did stuff that I wouldn’t do in my civilian life.” She planned to stay in the Army at least “until I was a colonel.”

However, just a couple of years into her military service, she began experiencing numbness in her face and arms. “Suddenly, my body was getting tired and I was finding it difficult to walk and run,” she says. She began to trip and fall.

She was told by medics that she was having muscle spasms, but her symptoms continued to get worse. “I was starting to get so tired, and I couldn’t concentrate as well,” she says. Eventually, her ill health forced her to leave the service in 1991.

Rodriguez returned home to her family in Puerto Rico. “It was a hard period,” she says. Without transition counseling to help her readjust to civilian life, she felt lost.

The doctors at her local VA medical center told her the same thing as the Army physicians – that she was experiencing muscle spasms.

Rodriguez’s mysterious symptoms often left her exhausted and unable to work. “It used to get me so tired that I couldn’t even lift one hand.” For the next three years, she existed in limbo.

Finally, she saw a new doctor, who asked her if she was having vision problems, based on an eye exam. When Rodriguez said she wasn’t, the doctor ordered a CT scan and then an MRI.

The MRI showed she had an autoimmune disease. “It was a relief, because I knew what it was,” she says; until her diagnosis, she had been afraid her symptoms were psychosomatic.

Resilience and new directions

When Rodriguez found out she could use her GI Bill benefits to study at home, she felt energized with new purpose and went on to get her master’s degree in graphic design and digital effects. For a while, she volunteered for the Paralyzed Veterans Association, designing their newsletter and doing other desktop publishing.

One of the things Rodriguez had always prided herself on was her physical prowess during her Army days. “I used to be a good runner, and I was good at sports,” she says. Although she can walk short distances, her disease has affected her mobility to the point where she uses a wheelchair most of the time.

Then she discovered wheelchair sports, especially wheelchair basketball, which became her favorite. “I used to play for the national team for Puerto Rico,” she says. “I was the only female on the team for about 10 years,’” before two other women joined the team;

(continued on page 7)

Taking natural disasters in stride

When Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in September 2017, Rodriguez and Hickok had been a team for only a few months. Her family lost everything on the first floor of their house when it flooded, but they were all safe on the second floor. Neighbors were not so lucky, so the family opened their doors to them and their pets.

Eventually, the waters receded, and Rodriguez and her family were able to take stock of the damage to their house and make repairs. “All this time, Hickok was very good,” she says. “He knew something had happened, but he was working with me, so he was great.”

When the earthquakes struck southern Puerto Rico earlier this year, Rodriguez’s home was spared damage (she lives in the north). “It was 4 o’clock in the morning when it happened,” she recalls. “I was sleeping and suddenly everything was shaking. I woke up and said, ‘Oh, the dog is going to be scared.’” Hickok was in his bed and lifted his head to look at her. “I said, ‘It’s OK, stay calm.’ And he just went back to sleep. He kept his cool.”
NCMS Supports America’s VetDogs

Jo-Ann Rodriguez’s service dog, Hickok, was sponsored by NCMS, which was founded in 1964. Members of NCMS work in all facets of industrial security: information, personnel, cyber, operations security (OPSEC), facilities, and technology, and in diverse agencies throughout the federal government.

In 2013, Rhonda Peyton, then president of NCMS, introduced the NCMS board of directors to America’s VetDogs. Supporting America’s disabled veterans was a natural outlet for NCMS’s philanthropic efforts; many of the group’s members are military or veterans. That year, representatives from America’s VetDogs were invited to attend the organization’s annual training seminar in Chicago, Illinois.

Sharon Tannahill, NCMS’s executive director, writes in an email: “In addition to the donation that is made by NCMS HQ every year, the Society also actively involves seminar participants to support the organization by offering VetDogs merchandise at the NCMS Store, setting up a donation page on the seminar website, and inviting veterans and their service dogs to speak at general sessions and interact with our attendees throughout the seminar.”

In addition, many local NCMS chapters host their own fundraisers throughout the year. Tannahill adds: “This is a true partnership, which NCMS is very proud of and hopes to support for years to come.”

Since 2013, NCMS has named four puppies, beginning with Cogswell, named for Air Force Col. James S. Cogswell, the first chief of the Unified Office of Industrial Security. Col. Cogswell was instrumental in recognizing the importance of industry and government partnering to ensure the protection of classified information.

Puppy Hickok was named for James N. Hickok, a past president of NCMS, and an Army veteran and West Point graduate and instructor. Buckels is named for Lonnie R. Buckels, another past president of NCMS. And in 2019, the organization chose the name Scout for their latest puppy.

Cogswell, Hickok, and Buckels have all become service dogs for disabled veterans. Puppy Scout is currently in our prison puppy program, working with an inmate handler and learning the basics of service dog work.

For more information about NCMS and its partnership with America’s VetDogs, please visit NCMS.VetDogs.org.

Jo-Ann Rodriguez (continued from page 6)

she continued playing for another several years.

Rodriguez has also competed in wheelchair softball, and track and field events such as discus, javelin, and shot put, where she often placed first in her events in the masters category at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

A long-awaited partner

Rodriguez wanted a service dog shortly after she became disabled, but it took almost 15 years before she finally got one. The biggest stumbling block she found, was that “no one would give [a service dog] to someone in Puerto Rico.” After 10 years of trying, she gave up for a while.

One day, while doing research for a project, Rodriguez saw a news story about America’s VetDogs. She went to the VetDogs website and began reading everything she could.

“I called and talked to Consumer Services,” she says, “and explained that I lived in Puerto Rico and wanted to get a service dog.” Within 15 to 20 minutes, she recalls, “I got a call back and was told to go ahead and apply.” Three days later, she had sent back the completed application.

Once Rodriguez had been accepted, she was put on the waiting list as VetDogs searched for the right dog for her, training it to do the tasks she needed. And even though she had been trying for 15 years, the 18 months she had to wait to be invited to class “was like the longest period.”

In June 2017, Rodriguez arrived at the VetDogs campus in Smithtown and was partnered with service dog Hickok. The dog has been trained to perform tasks such as retrieving items, opening doors, and providing bracing and counterbalance when she walks.

Back on track

Hickok has become a full member of her family, and he goes everywhere with Rodriguez. When they are together at doctors’ appointments at the VA, Rodriguez often engages with other veterans and answers their questions about service dogs. She’s even encouraged a friend and fellow veteran to apply for a service dog of his own.

“Hickok has given me his unconditional love and brought happiness back to my life. I don’t have a reason to be sad,” she says. ⭐
5 Reasons to Become a VetDogs Patriot Today!

1. It's easy. Go to Patriots.VetDogs.org. Click on the “Donate” button. Put in your gift amount, choose a time frame from the drop-down menu, and click on the “Give Now” button. On the next screen, put in your billing information and confirm your amount.

2. Your gift makes a difference right away. Your initial gift is processed the day you sign up and your monthly pledge is automatically billed to your credit card on the same day each month.

3. You’re in charge. As an America’s VetDogs Patriot, you can change your monthly giving at any time by calling our America’s VetDogs Patriots Support Team at 866-838-3647 or by sending an email to Info@VetDogs.org.

4. It’s convenient. You’ll receive an annual statement to assist in your tax preparation.

5. Your gifts go much further. With monthly giving, we have fewer administrative costs, which means more of your gift goes directly to training the dogs and supporting the veterans you care about.

Patriots.VetDogs.org

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