In August 2016, NBC and its morning program TODAY partnered with America’s VetDogs to raise a future service dog on air as their “puppy with a purpose.”

For the next 16 months, black Labrador Retriever Charlie worked with Olivia Poff and quickly became a viewer favorite as Poff socialized him to new experiences, and taught him good house manners and basic obedience. Together they made appearances around the country as Charlie learned how to behave in public.

As he grew, Poff and Katie Ruiz, a VetDogs service dog instructor, began teaching him specific service dog tasks that he would use when finally paired with a disabled veteran.

In December 2017, Charlie was placed with retired U.S. Air Force Staff Sergeant Stacy Pearsall, a combat photographer who had been deployed to Iraq and elsewhere to document the work of military personnel around the globe.

Charlie’s popularity with the viewers and staff, and his and Pearsall’s success as a team led NBC to pursue another “puppy with a purpose” with America’s VetDogs.

For 2018-19, however, they wanted to feature a different type of assistance dog. We suggested a guide dog (which would come from our sister organization, the Guide Dog Foundation), with Olivia Poff once again as the on-air puppy raiser. And, as a guide dog mobility instructor, she would be able to incorporate guide dog training with puppy raising from an early age, thereby giving viewers an insight into how a puppy becomes a guide dog.

For this season, we went big: We decided to raise an entire “Class of 2019” on the air. In addition to the TODAY puppy, we also placed dogs with local NBC stations in Baltimore, Atlanta, Boston, and Los Angeles so viewers in those regions would be able to follow their own puppy with a purpose.
I’d like to use my first column in *The VetDogs Sentinel* to introduce myself to the VetDogs family of donors, volunteers, and other supporters. I am pleased to join the organization as the new president and chief executive officer, succeeding Wells B. Jones, who retired after almost 30 years at the helm of the Guide Dog Foundation, and, since 2006, America’s VetDogs.

My first months at VetDogs have proved to be both eventful and fruitful. After meeting with the staff, I had the opportunity to observe guide and service dog training my first week. Two things jumped out immediately: how passionate all the employees are about our mission, their dedication … and how smart guide and service dogs are.

The dogs can be taught to maneuver around obstacles and stop at curbs, or how to retrieve dropped items and push automatic door buttons for someone in a wheelchair (just two of the many tasks they can be trained for).

When a class of five veterans arrived on campus to train with their new service dogs in April, I saw the culmination of the dogs’ months of training. I was honored to spend time with the veterans, to hear stories of their service and what brought them to VetDogs, and to watch them work with the dogs that will bring them renewed independence.

Listening to the veterans speak reminded me of my grandfathers, both of whom fought in Europe during World War II as soldiers in the U.S. Army, and it made me appreciate all they had endured. My father is a retired police officer. Now that we train assistance dogs for first-responders, this is another connection I have to the men and women we serve at VetDogs.

I am grateful for the trust and confidence the boards of directors have placed in me to take America’s VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation to the next level as the leaders in the assistance dog movement, and I welcome your ideas and continued support of us and the veterans we serve.

John Miller
President & Chief Executive Officer
Tyler McGibbon: ‘I wouldn’t change one thing at all’

Tyler McGibbon was profiled on Megyn Kelly Today as NBC’s newest “puppies with a purpose” were introduced. Learn more about this remarkable young man whose service dog has changed his life.

Tyler McGibbon was in the second grade on September 11, 2001, but the terrorist attacks that day made a lasting impact on the 7-year-old. From that moment, his career goal was set: When he was old enough, he would enlist in the U.S. Army and serve his country.

It was a dream he fulfilled right after he graduated from high school. McGibbon reported for duty in July 2013 and served with the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, which is based at Fort Riley, Kansas.

In the Army, he was a cavalry scout. Cavalry scouts are reconnaissance specialists, and before a mission, they are tasked with planning the routes, setting up observation posts, and noting areas of interest. His responsibilities included controlling a small unmanned aircraft system. As McGibbon says in a 2016 interview, “We protect the protectors.”

McGibbon’s unit deployed to Kuwait in 2014, when he was just 19 years old. In December, about eight months in-country, he was injured in Kuwait when the Humvee he was riding in rolled over while returning to base. He was ejected from the vehicle and sustained severe traumatic brain injuries and a fractured spine.

After undergoing emergency surgery in Kuwait, he was medevaced to Germany. His family – parents George and Donna, and brother Justin – had to get emergency passports and were flown to meet him, all the time wondering if Tyler would survive his injuries.

In a video interview, George McGibbon says he recalls thinking: “Is he going to make the night? And then is he going to make the next night, and the next night?”

After being stabilized in Germany, McGibbon was transferred to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and then to the polytrauma unit at McGuire Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Virginia. He had slipped into a coma after the accident, and it would be almost three months before the young soldier woke up. When he did, he was transferred back to Walter Reed to continue his recovery. (While at McGuire, he was promoted from private first class to specialist.)

For the next two years, McGibbon focused on his rehabilitation as he recovered from his injuries, learning how to walk and talk and eat again. Art therapy aided with his coordination and speech: A challenge he set for himself was to sing Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire,” with its rapid-fire lyrics. During his recuperation, the family determined that dad George – who had lost his job in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2012 – should become Tyler’s full-time caregiver.

McGibbon was invited to the 2016 State of the Union address as the guest of a congressional representative from Illinois. The Army’s Warrior Transition Brigade (continued on page 6)
Puppy raisers Andrew Kitchens and Danielle Arnold (left and center) attend the Jacksonville Marine Corps 1/2 Marathon & Freedom 5K along with VetDogs graduate Mark Novak (seated, right) in October 2017, with more than 2500 runners from more than 15 states. Since 2012, the event’s sponsors have donated nearly $60,000 in support of America’s VetDogs and disabled veterans.

The New York Jets invited America’s VetDogs to be part of their Annual Salute to Service game at MetLife Stadium in November 2017, which included a visit to their training complex in New Jersey.

VetDogs graduate Lech Sierpowski joined representatives of VetDogs at Florham Park.

Jets fans get to meet a future service dog before the game.

VetDogs graduate Stacy Pearsall and service dog Charlie visited the Hall of Heroes at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center recently. This is where Stacy’s Veterans Portrait Project had its genesis, following a conversation she had with a World War II veteran.

Service dog Mike pays his respects at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. Mike is the service dog of retired U.S. Army First Sergeant Kent Phyfe, who was visiting Washington, DC, with his fellow veterans.

The VetDogs tent at MetLife Stadium. Field representative Steve La Vallee works with a future service dog to demonstrate different service dog tasks.
A class sponsorship helps underwrite the room, board, training, and transportation for a full class of students. Class sponsors receive recognition throughout class and in the graduation program on Celebration Day. You will have the opportunity to meet and have lunch with the students, and you will receive a framed photo of the class and a DVD copy of the class video and photo slideshow. Sponsoring a service dog class is just one of the many sponsorship opportunities available to donors and supporters of America’s VetDogs. To learn about our other sponsorship opportunities, go to Sponsor.VetDogs.org.

As part of our prison puppy program, carefully chosen inmates raise and train puppies who will one day become service dogs for disabled veterans. Inmates work with a VetDogs instructor to teach obedience, housebreaking, and basic service dog tasks. This is the current class of future service dogs at Osborn Correctional institution in Somers, CT.

We always need weekend puppy raisers to teach the pups good house manners, take them on car rides and public transportation, go to different types of events – all the sights and sounds of the “real world” so they will be confident wherever they might go as a service dog. To learn how you can become a puppy raiser and change a life, go to WeekendRaiser.VetDogs.org.

In October 2017, America’s VetDogs spent the day with the New York Islanders as they shot their 2018 “Pucks & Paws” calendar, with proceeds going to VetDogs. At the March 26, 2018, game, Islander player Scott Mayfield presented a $15,000 check to John Miller, the new president and CEO of America’s VetDogs. Pictured (left to right): Cameron McLendon, apprentice trainer; Miller; and Mayfield.
We carefully evaluated several litters to determine who would be the right fit for this high-profile job. Not only did the pups have to be the right age, they needed to have the right temperament and intelligence to become guide and service dogs. The pups we decided on are all siblings from the same litter.

In late February, as the new “puppy with a purpose” came bounding out from off-camera, he was joined by four other puppies. The TODAY hosts were completely surprised at the scope of the project this season.

After a busy day of media appearances, four of the NBC puppies headed to their new homes with their new puppy raisers, and the TODAY puppy returned home with Poff.

Viewers were asked to choose names for the pups, and by the end of the week, they had spoken: Sunny is the TODAY puppy in New York; Izzy calls Atlanta home; Camden will grow up in Baltimore; Brady in Boston, and Zuma, Los Angeles. Izzy will follow a guide dog curriculum, just like Sunny, while Brady, Camden, and Zuma will grow up to become service dogs.

During the pups’ first few months, the most important aspect of their lives will be their exposure to many different sights and sounds and smells of their hometowns. They’ll get all of that in spades with their weekly appearances on their local NBC stations.

When they’re ready, the puppies will continue their formal training at America’s VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation to be placed with individuals with disabilities.

Check out the puppies’ regular “pupdates” at NBC.VetDogs.org and follow their adventures on Instagram:
Sunny, @GuideDogFoundation
Izzy, @11AlivePuppy
Camden, @WBALTvPuppy
Brady, @NBC10BostonPuppy
Zuma, @NBCLAPuppy

‘I wouldn’t change one thing at all.’

facilitates outings like these, which help injured soldiers make the transition back to duty or to civilian life.

Later that year, McGibbon applied for a service dog from America’s VetDogs. He was on our waiting list for about a year while we worked to train the right dog for his specific needs that would mitigate his disabilities.

McGibbon met his service dog Trooper in June 2017. Trooper has been trained to provide counterbalance when McGibbon goes up and down stairs; retrieve items such as a phone or cane; press accessible door buttons; and turn light switches on and off.

“It was love at first sight,” McGibbon recounts in an interview for Megyn Kelly Today.

Despite all the new challenges he has faced and overcome in the past several years, McGibbon says he has no regrets about joining the Army and serving his country. “If I had to do it again, I wouldn’t change one thing at all.” Joining the military, he adds, is about “becoming someone better than you were the day before.”

McGibbon offers this last piece of advice: “If I’ve been through this, don’t ever think that something that has happened to you defines you as a person. You can still be whoever you want to be.” With Trooper by his side, that’s just what he intends to do.
In March 2018, John Miller joined America’s VetDogs as the new president and chief executive officer. He succeeds Wells B. Jones, who retired after heading both VetDogs and its sister organization, the Guide Dog Foundation.

When the Guide Dog Foundation was founded in 1946, a component of its mission was to provide guide dogs at no charge to the veterans of World War II who had lost their vision. Blind veterans would continue to be served through the Guide Dog Foundation for more than 70 years.

In 2003, as wounded service members began returning home from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we saw the need for dogs that could be trained for those with disabilities other than blindness, and we created America’s VetDogs, then called “a project of the Guide Dog Foundation.”

VetDogs became a separate not-for-profit organization in 2006, and trains and provides guide dogs for veterans who are blind, service dogs for those with disabilities other than blindness, hearing dogs for veterans who have lost their hearing, physical and occupational therapy dogs to work in VA and military medical centers, and combat operational stress control dogs to be deployed overseas. In 2016, we opened our services to first-responders with work-related disabilities.

Miller brings experienced leadership in national nonprofits and fundraising, and has been tasked with creating growth and sustainability to continue to advance the dual missions of America’s VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation.

According to Don Dea, who serves as the chair of the boards of directors, “John has embraced the mission and values that have been the core of the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs, and we’re thrilled to have him join our team. We are very confident he has the leadership to drive both organizations’ success in the next chapter.”

Before joining America’s VetDogs, Miller served as national president and CEO of the Tourette Association of America, where he increased revenue and implemented a Centers of Excellence program that partnered TAA with the top medical institutions around the country. He led the Red Cross on Long Island during one of the most important periods in the organization’s 100-year history. He directed the mergers of three independent chapters into one stronger organization and oversaw local responses to high-impact national events including Hurricane Irene and Superstorm Sandy, two of the largest disasters in recent Long Island history.

Miller has been recognized for his strong leadership and has been acknowledged as one of the most influential and brightest businessmen on Long Island. Long Island Business News honored him as an Outstanding CEO in 2014 and one of the top “40 Under 40” executives in 2013.

“I am honored to work with the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs, and the entire team at this exciting time,” he says. “I look forward to creating even more dynamic and vibrant opportunities that improve the lives of people with disabilities.”

In his very busy first few weeks, Miller met with the staff, toured the campus, and observed guide and service dog training. ★
Top 5 Reasons to Become a **VetDogs Patriot**

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. 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.

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

**Patriots.VetDogs.org**

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