

An Exclusive Magazine Serving the Residents of Landfall & Wrightsville Beach

intracoastal

JANUARY 2020

living

New Year, New Beginnings
Veterans With Service Dogs



Best Version Media

Photo by HONGJIN BIAN

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The Carousel Center, Patrick Jeunesse, and
Courtesy of Weekend Meals on Wheels

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DEAR RESIDENTS,

Happy New Year! As we bid adieu to 2019, we hope you had a joyful holiday season celebrating with your families, friends, and neighbors.

Intracoastal Living's team was privileged to meet many of you and to tell your stories this past year. This month's **Resident Feature Story** about **Canines for Service** is another wonderful example of the great things happening in our community. Their dedicated volunteers and staff provide new beginnings and new lives for Armed Forces veterans as well as the dogs rescued from animal shelters who now serve them.

To those of our readers of a "senior-persuasion" and to all who love and care for them, take a good look at this month's **AWE** ("Aging Well...") article, sponsored by **The Davis Community**. Thank you to all the sponsors who make it possible for us to print and mail this exclusive community magazine to Landfall and Wrightsville Beach residents each month. We encourage you—our readers—to patronize and thank those establishments.



And be sure to check out the **January Calendar of Events**, which contains something for you and the entire family. Enjoy!

George Clarke

PUBLISHER, *Intracoastal Living*



This month—and why not all year 'round?—it's all about pets, especially dogs. I mean, what's not to like about our furry, four-legged, Fido-ish friends? As this issue attests, they are everywhere, rescued and rehabilitated and working as service dogs, therapy dogs, comfort pets, and even Santa's helpers.

We want to thank them for their service to our vets, persons with disabilities, children suffering from traumatic experiences, and generally for being (hu)man's best friends. Thanks also to the amazingly caring and dedicated folks at **Canines for Service**, **Coastal Animal Rescue Effort (CARE)**, **Atlantic Animal Hospital & Pet Care Resort**, and **The Carousel Center**, who literally "leave no pet behind" in their efforts to mend broken lives and make all our lives whole.



Kamili with her beloved Boxer rescues, Tezi (left) and Nala (right).

Until next month, love your pets, respect our vets, hold your children tight, and take it easy!

Kamili Anderson

SENIOR WRITER/CONTRIBUTOR, *Intracoastal Living*



Trainers, staff, and service dog trainees flank board chair Ed Sullivan (2nd from left, rear) in front of CFS headquarters. Noted in this article as well are Landfall resident and volunteer trainer Gerard Kratchman (far left, rear), Development Director Colleen Vihlen (2nd from right, rear), and Lead Trainer Emily Moss (far right, rear).

New Year, New Beginnings Veterans With Service Dogs

BY KAMILI ANDERSON, PHOTOS BY HONGJIN BIAN & COURTESY OF CANINES FOR SERVICE

The late animal welfare advocate and ASPCA director Roger Caras once wrote that “Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole.” Nowhere is that more evident than in an out-of-the-way industrial park off Market Street, home to Canines for Service (CFS). There, real magic takes place every day, as Wrightsville Beach resident Ed Sullivan, chair of CFS’ board, and Landfall resident Gerard Kratchman, a volunteer dog trainer, can attest.

As the organization’s Development Director, Colleen Vihlen, explains, nearly four million veterans suffer from service-connected disabilities. The need to provide our military veterans and wounded warriors with solutions and support, she maintains, is “tremendous” because many of them report avoiding or being frustrated and isolated from social, work, and family activities due to their disabilities.

“With their service dog,” Vihlen claims, “all that changes.” She recounts that veterans of multiple conflicts, from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, have received service dogs and training from CFS. The oldest have been vets in their 70s, she notes, “who have struggled with PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] for years and have hidden their disability under the rug until they retire, then everything comes back to them and they can’t cope.” In those cases, she insists, the support, comfort, and dedication of a trained service dog can help return these wounded warriors “to the closest thing to normalcy” in their lives.



Ed Sullivan and Colleen Vihlen with two of the program’s top dogs.

At CFS, as Vihlen, Sullivan, and Kratchman enthusiastically agree, lives are changed “four paws at a time.” Indeed, the mission of this Wilmington-based 501(c)3 organization and its multiple initiatives—Canines for Veterans, Canines for Therapy, Canines for Literacy, and the CFS Trainers Program—is to empower people with disabilities “to achieve greater independence and enhanced quality of life through the services of specially trained assistance dogs.”

According to Sullivan, who first learned about the organization from a friend two years ago, CFS does all that and so much more. Established in 1996 when its first service dog began training, the organization originally was dubbed Carolina Canines for Service. In 2011, it launched a rebranding campaign and changed its name to Canines for Service to reflect its founders’ and board members’ interest in casting a broader net and gaining national recognition. It is currently the longest standing service dog provider in North Carolina.

Headed by brand-new CEO Susan Heaton and managed day-to-day by Vihlen, CFS today operates with six staff members and scores of volunteer dog walkers and other supporters. It has received grants, recommendations, and recognition from several uniformed services organizations. Other supporters (either monetary or in-kind) include Live Oak Bank, K 38 Restaurants, The Petco Foundation, Disabled American Veterans Charitable Trust, GreaterGood.org, Wilmington Animal Healthcare (veterinary needs), Wilmington Orthotics & Prosthetics, and countless other donors, businesses, and groups in the Greater Wilmington community.

*“Dogs are not our whole life,
but they make our lives whole.”*

- ROGER CARAS

ANSWERING THE CALL

CFS board chair Ed Sullivan is a former Navy aviator who flew over 50 Desert Storm combat missions in Kuwait and Iraq and who himself has a service-related disability. “Having spent time in several VA medical centers,” he recalls, “and seeing what our men and women are going through when they come back from wars... with ability issues, PTSD, and traumatic brain injuries, I just knew that they needed so much help.”

CFS, Sullivan adds, reflecting on his lifelong affection for dogs and his special passion for rescues, “was one of those missions that I really wanted to be a part of.” “When I learned that CFS was about saving a dog’s life and training a dog and then providing it to someone who has mobility or other issues, that was the icing on the cake. I just knew I had to be involved in that organization, even if it was just as a dogwalker!”

Sullivan lives on Harbor Island with his wife, Marilou. The couple re-located permanently to the Channel Walk neighborhood in Wrightsville Beach in 2016 from Charlotte and quickly became active in the community and their church, St. Therese Catholic Church, on Wrightsville Beach, where Ed heads up the Knights of Columbus chapter.

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As chair of the CFS board since 2018, Sullivan takes a leadership role in charting both the long and short-term goals for the organization with the support of CEO Heaton, Vihlen, and the CFS staff, volunteers, and clients. One of the board's recent priorities, he noted, was to identify and put into place fresh, forward-thinking leadership. "Our new CEO (Heaton)," he maintains, "has a lot of background in veteran-focused nonprofits and commercial companies. We are very fortunate to bring her on."

Other priorities include expanding the organization's capacity by hiring more trainers and reinforcing the staff with interns. As Sullivan credits, "We've rescued over 24 dogs from shelters this year. We have 18 dogs currently in training, which is more than I think we've ever had...and managing those dogs, giving them training, takes a lot of effort, so we're really tight on staff. But right now, we have six interns who are learning to be dog trainers."

Not incidentally, he adds, "Another thing that really is a priority for the board is fundraising, getting out into the community, and another aspect is to increase awareness. Right now, we're pretty well known in Wilmington and other parts of North Carolina, but we really want to increase that awareness around the whole state and several states, and let people know what Canines for Service is doing."

Landfall resident Gerard Kratchman, a Vietnam veteran and former teacher, is another dedicated supporter of CFS' Canines for Veterans program. "As a veteran myself," he explains, "I wanted to volunteer in a way that could benefit veterans in particular, so the internship program at Canines for Service appealed to me."

Though new to the Wilmington area, having moved here just two years ago, volunteering has been an auxiliary way of life for Kratchman. Over the past five years, he has served as an elementary math teacher in Tanzania, a daycare aide for kids with special needs in Uganda and Vietnam, and an Amazon rainforest replenishment camp laborer in Ecuador. But after visiting Landfall in 2017, Kratchman maintains, "I immediately decided that I wanted to live here." He lives in a home off Regatta Drive.



Gerard Kratchman and Aiden.

Kratchman's passion for the mission and work of the service-dog organization echoes that of Sullivan, the CFS staff, and other volunteers. Gerard speaks enthusiastically about the work they have done with the organization since last summer, working as a team to train Aiden, a sprightly mixed-breed dog. "At the beginning, we were coming in six hours a day, four days a week," Gerard notes, "working with the dog and then leaving him here. We now train Aiden at home. He lives with us, we feed him, and we come in here twice a week to learn whatever we're supposed to be teaching him. It's a lot to do, but it's a worthwhile project."

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Two service dogs rescued to provide critical support and companionship for veterans and disabled persons, currently in training at CFS: Aiden and Phineas.

THE DOGS

CFS' prospective service dogs come from animal shelters in New Hanover and surrounding counties. They are strays and surrenders, lost or abused animals. CFS literally offers them a new "leash" on life. "Some of them," board chair Sullivan attests, "we get at the last minute before they're scheduled to be euthanized."

Most of the dogs are inducted into the program between one and two years of age, and they train with multiple trainers for 9 to 13 months. They must meet specified height, weight, and strength requirements. Most are Labrador or Lab mixes, but some other breeds also qualify.

However, once a dog has been inducted into the CFS program, as Lead Trainer Emily Moss explains, they cease being pets. For insurance and other purposes, they are officially deemed "medical equipment." CFS "graduates" are prized most highly for their utility, not their companionship, Moss adds, although both are important. They are socialized to serve, not to play.

According to Vihlen, "These dogs get a lot of love and a lot of attention while they're being prepared to serve. They get plenty of play and exercise as well as socialization time with their doggie classmates. We will not place a dog unless it's perfect for the client." Those that don't make the cut, have untreatable health issues, or show unwarranted aggression, she adds, are placed for adoption into loving homes. None are returned to shelters or euthanized.

Dogs that qualify for the training program must show a capacity to learn and demonstrate up to 90 skills and commands, customized to support the specific physical and/or emotional disabilities of the veterans and other CFS clients in whose homes they ultimately will be placed. They must learn, for example, how to locate and retrieve household items, open doors, go up and down stairs one step at a time, and myriad life-enhancing and life-saving tasks as needed to support persons with mobility or cognitive limitations.

THE TRAINING

CFS Lead Trainer Moss is a Certified AKC Canine Good Citizen Approved Evaluator and Western Carolina University graduate. She oversees the intensive training regimens that both canine and human participants in the CFS program must undergo before the former can be certified as service animals to support veterans with mobility impairments, traumatic brain injury or other disability issues. In that role, Moss works with the several interns who support CFS' staff and volunteers at the Wilmington training facilities. She also oversees a number of military personnel who have been "enlisted" for a special type of service: that of helping to nurture and train CFS service dogs while serving out their prison terms in the brig at nearby Camp Lejeune.

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Canine Operations Manager Danielle Thaxton trains service dog Miles on his laundry support skills.



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Twice a week, Moss goes to the U.S. Marines base to get the inmates “all trained up” to work with the program’s dogs. Currently, there are seven dogs at Camp Lejeune, and they live with the inmates in their cells as both learn the over 90 commands—learning from five to seven commands per week—that will be essential to the dogs fulfilling their future service roles.



Army veteran George shows his new service dog Lettie some love—and vice versa.

According to Moss, the prison program has been very successful, with canines and inmates alike “working around the clock” and “flying” through the early training stages. The program has proven a special boon to the jailed servicemembers, Moss claims, giving them “something to love on and take care of” and “totally turning around” some of them behaviorally. The dogs are brought back to Wilmington for more advanced training, explains Moss; however, several inmates have expressed interest in continuing their dog-training pursuits and are now volunteering post-prison.

GEORGE AND LETTIE

George is a married, 38-year-old CFS client; a muscle-bound, powerlifting, Army veteran. He did two tours in Iraq, serving also in Alaska and Germany. Born and raised in Long Island but currently residing in New Bern, he was a wheeled vehicle mechanic and base command support for a colonel. Before and after leaving the military, George had been seeing a therapist for his extreme social anxiety and panic attacks, and he had been looking for a service dog for some time, but the costs were prohibitive. In the military, while serving on the base, everything was punched on the schedule. Outside of the rigid confines of the military he suffered from a fear of going out in public. He would avoid interacting with people.

Once he connected with the CFS Canines for Veterans program, he says, everything changed. “Colleen pretty much answered every question I had,” George said, visibly relieved. “I was pretty much in tears when I got the phone call saying my application had been approved and that I had been matched up with a dog so I can live a normal lifestyle.”

He and Lettie have been together for three months. “This dog is starting to sense my heightened anxiety. She’ll jump up on my lap and nuzzle me. If we’re walking, she’ll nudge me. She keeps me from jumping into things head on. People see her first, and she provides that buffer between me and people. She senses those things and alerts me if someone’s coming up to me.

“With her there,” George says of Lettie fondly, “I’m starting to ground myself and focus better. It’s a lot more comforting. She’s been a real asset.”

“I’m extremely happy with her,” he insists, “Every day happy.” For her part, two-and-a-half-year-old, 66-pound Lab mix Lettie is showing her CFS mettle. She gets along well with George’s wife, two young kids, and the family’s other dog.

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A gallery of veterans who have been happily matched with their Canines for Service dogs, clockwise from top right: Nate (Marine Corps) and Dexter; Robert (National Guard/Army/Marines) and Cyrus; Stephanie (Marine Corps) and Nathan; Corey (Army) and Roman.

During the day, George says, Lettie wears her uniform, a harness clearly marked with the service dog emblem. "But at around 1800 hours," he notes, "the vest comes off, and she gets a chance to be a 'regular' dog." As a result, the two have become virtually inseparable. Lettie goes with George everywhere, including to his therapy sessions and to the power-lifting competitions he officiates on weekends.

"When she's working, she's on," George explains, "But I show her a lot of love and she shows me a lot of love. She's taught me love. She's there to help me. It means more to me than anything."

SAVING LIVES AND MAKING THEM WHOLE

With active dogs and clients in 14 states, including California, the Midwest, and all over North Carolina, CFS' goal is to grow steadily while maintaining a high level of quality. Currently, the program

graduates and places one dog a month, on average, with a veteran. But the organization's staff and volunteers enthusiastically agree that more is needed, and interest in their programs is growing.

Plainly speaking, for wounded warriors and persons with disabilities, Canines for Service helps to make their lives whole again. For (hu)man's best friend, CFS' training and placement program is both a lifesaver and a life-mender. And, as Development Director Colleen Vihlen contends, working and volunteering at CFS is a "dream job": an opportunity to combine love for dogs with passion for serving the military community.

The enthusiasm of Ed Sullivan and Gerard Kratchman, veterans both, for CFS' work and continued growth serve only to reinforce Vihlen's love and passion. As board chair, Sullivan eagerly welcomes prospective volunteers and donors to tour CFS' facilities and to join the organization in its efforts. "We are eager for others to see and understand what we do, to see all these trainers and interns, and all these wonderful dogs doing their training. They are all absolutely amazing! These dogs change lives."

"If the world could all be dogs," concludes Sullivan, who joyfully claims that his own dog, Heidi, is always happy to see him and take family walks, "it would be a better world." ~

The Wilmington training facilities of Canines for Service, a 501c3 nonprofit organization, are located at 221 Old Dairy Road, Unit 1. For more information, visit the CFS website at www.caninesforservice.org, send an email to information@caninesforservice.org, or call 910-362-8181.



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