



Guide Dogs
of America



Tender Loving
Canines

A "SHIELD" OF Love and Confidence

On February 1st, 2020, Luis Pingarron got in his truck to depart Guide Dogs of America, having completed seven days of service dog team training. During his drive home to San Diego, California, Luis called his brother to see if he wanted to meet for breakfast at a local diner. Flabbergasted that Luis wanted to eat at a public restaurant, his brother became concerned. It had been years since Luis had asked him to go out to eat; something certainly must be wrong. Little did he know that thousands of people had come together to make this moment possible.

It was on August 7th, 1990, when President George H.W. Bush ordered the organization of Operation Desert Shield, and 18-year-old Luis had begun his basic military training. His mother was apprehensive about him enlisting, as she had seen the effect war can have on a man. Luis' father was a Korean War veteran who came home "shell-shocked," a term for what is now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

After completing basic training, Luis was deployed to the Gulf of the Middle East. For three years, he worked on an aircraft carrier as an aviation mechanic. While Luis has his share of distressing war-stories, the most harrowing is his description of living on the carrier. He describes the scars left on his forehead from the bunk above him – jolted awake by planes landing two decks above.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Hello everyone, and welcome to the second edition of our 2020 newsletter. In our last issue we announced our recent merger with the service dog program, Tender Loving Canines. Since then, our entire world has changed due to COVID-19, altering our everyday lives and the futures we had predicted. Our hearts go out to anyone who has been affected by the Coronavirus - we will get through it.

As you continue to browse through our newsletter you will learn about one of our first service dog graduates since the merger, an adventurous guide dog user, and our newest apprentice trainer. The impact of our program seen in all three of these stories fills me with pride as Director of Guide Dogs of America.

Finally, I want to sincerely thank everyone who has come together over the past few months. Through all of this change there is one constant - our GDA/TLC family keeps our organization and its mission moving forward.

—Russell Gittlen, President



*Russell Gittlen, President,
Guide Dogs of America*

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On June 24th, 1993, Luis was discharged from the military. A discharge date should be the signal of promise and opportunity, a new beginning in a hero's life, but for some, this date could be the start of their PTSD. Pingarron explains, "When you're active duty, you don't realize anything is wrong. You're preoccupied with your service. You're surrounded by your best friends. It isn't until you get back home that you face overwhelming isolation and have to battle this disease."

The permanent memory of sleeping on an aircraft carrier torments him in his sleep. His attacks wake him up in a sweat and riddle him with anxiety that can sometimes turn to rage. Luis points to times during his service, recounting the missions where he was trapped and stranded. Any time he encounters the feeling of helplessness, it triggers a biological onslaught of emotions that are out of his control.

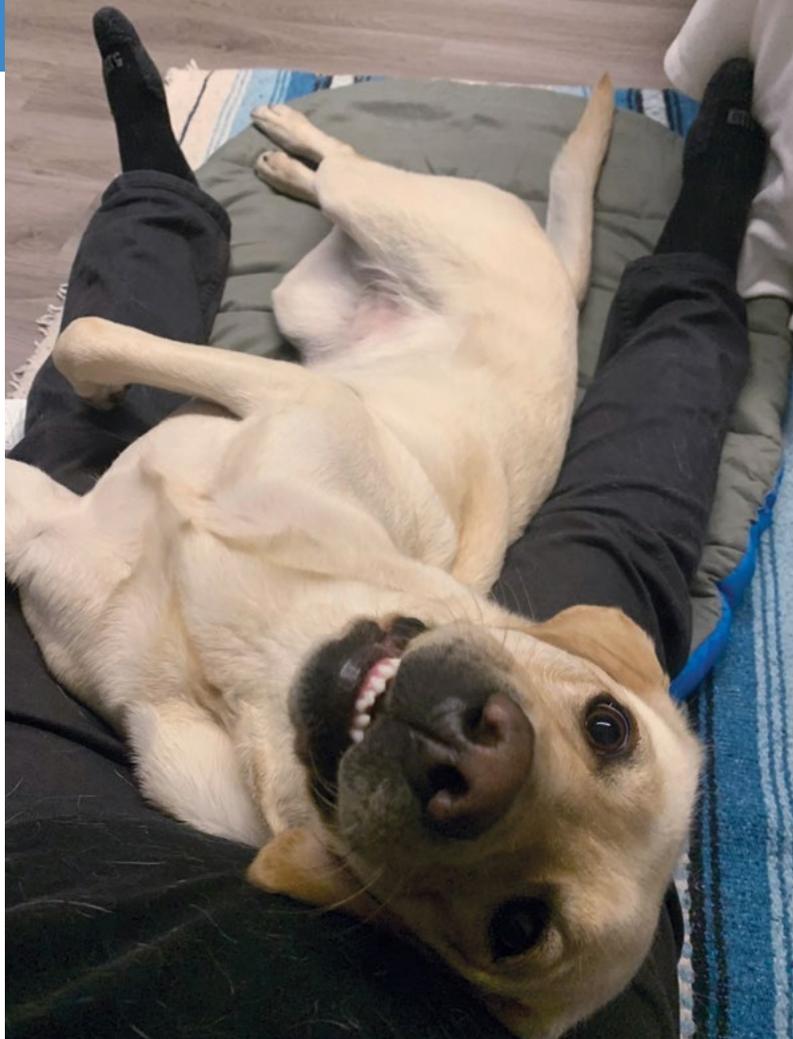
Luis bounced around aimlessly for years after his service. He asks, "Did you ever see the old 'Incredible Hulk' TV show? That was me. I would settle into a place, finally feeling like I was on the right path. Next thing I know, I would have an attack-like episode. I would 'Hulk-out', and then would have to start all over again."

On July 4th, 2006, Luis was in Longview, Washington for the state lumberjack competition – an annual tradition for him.

"I was in the parking lot, and some kids were selling an ill puppy. They didn't have enough money to get the help it needed." He rushed the puppy to the nearest vet, saving the puppies life. Luis named the chocolate lab mix Sheriff. He explains, "I was so close to that dog; I was always with him. Sheriff forced me to get out of the house. We would never go farther than a two-block radius, but I was doing more than I ever had since my return."

Sheriff crossed the rainbow bridge just about two years ago. Without Sheriff by his side, Luis stopped leaving the house altogether. Wanting to get another dog, his wife insisted that this one would be a service dog that was trained to help him with his PTSD.

He started looking into service dog programs and found



that Tender Loving Canines (TLC) was based nearby in San Diego. He moved through the application process quickly, even attending a service dog team graduation at Camp Pendleton.

Three weeks before class, TLC brought Luis' future service dog to his house for a preliminary visit. You can hear the excitement grow in his voice as he tells the story. "I was very anxious about the meeting. It was raining, and I had a towel prepared to dry the dog off. I am running the towel over her and before I know it, she is in my lap, loving on me. It gives me chills man. They tell me her name is Shield – which was an amazing coincidence given that Desert Shield was the operation that started my military service. At that moment, I knew it was meant to be. It was just one of those serendipitous things."

January 25th, 2020 was the first day of Luis' service dog team training. "That first night was really hard for me," Luis recalls. "I'm in an unfamiliar place, and I'm uncomfortable. I had a hard time falling asleep as it was. Next thing I know, I hear an alarm going off in the

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building. At this point, everything is pointing towards a terrible attack.”

Luis opens up, “Shield was crated that first night. I figured since I’m up and walking around, I might as well let her out. I sit down on the ground to try to calm myself down, and within an instant,

she’s laying on my legs. I calmed down immediately. It’s super uncanny. She started working for me on day one.”

Luis is amazed by Shield’s intuition. “She’s been trained to alert when I show physical signs of being triggered. I’ll start scratching my forehead and sweat as I start pacing. I’ll cross my arms. I won’t even recognize that I’m anxious, or that I’m doing these things and I’ll feel a nudge at my hip.” He continues, glowing about Shield, “If I didn’t have such a strong relationship with her, I would swear this was magic or some sorcery. It’s difficult to comprehend. Sometimes when she does one of her queues, I feel like David Blaine after a magic trick.”

On February 1st, 2020, Luis received his service dog

team certification and called his brother to get breakfast. It was a huge win in a never-ending war against PTSD. “I’ve had a lot of growth. It’s been miraculous. Now that I have Shield, I am able to deal with it (PTSD). But I want to be clear, at the end of the day I still have to tackle this thing that affects me.”

Since that day, Luis’ world has been changed for the better. Shield has been a savior for Luis amid the COVID-19 pandemic. “She’s been my best friend. If she wasn’t here, I would be horrifically isolated in the house. I would be hyper vigilant and afraid to go out.” He says he’s been taking Shield on long walks every morning and every night.

Luis adds, “This doesn’t just impact me, it affects my wife too. I used to feel bad that I would need her to come to the store with me, or come in the house when I was alone, but because I have Shield she’s able to have her life back too.”

Luis finishes by saying, “The people and the work that went into making Shield possible have given me a new perspective on life. I was at GDA recently and I saw people waiting in line to volunteer. Now when I am hit with a panic attack in the middle of the night, I know these people are out here making sure I have Shield to get me through. There are thousands of people working to make my life better. It’s amazing.” 🐾

Students Reaching New Heights

Guide Dogs of America graduate Gary Simmons may have lost his sense of sight, but not his sense of adventure. Simmons says it is because of his guide dogs that he has lived a life full of excitement and adventure.

One of Simmons’s favorite hobbies is sky diving. He accomplished his first jump back in 2010. He recently completed his second jump while his current guide dog, Walter, waited safely on the ground.

On jump day, he took the leap of faith with six other people who are visually impaired. “We reached 13,500 feet, and it was time to jump - in tandem with an

instructor, of course,” said Simmons. “You jump, and you are freefalling at 160 miles per hour for about a minute and the wind is just crazy - it’s quite a sensation.”

Several people have asked him why he skydives if he can’t see anything. He is ready with an answer, “**Even though I can’t see, I can sense, smell, hear, and feel the whole experience.**” 🐾



A Week Under Blindfold— A Week In the Dark

In order to become a Guide Dogs of America instructor, one must complete a three-year apprenticeship program. A first-year apprentice must experience one week under blindfold during a time that class is in session.

The one-week submersion allows our future instructors to try to further understand the challenges a person who is blind or visually impaired faces. Sydney Fujishige recently completed her week under blindfold with class #414. The moment she stepped out of the parking lot, the blindfold went on, and she was ready for her week in the dark.

The struggles came right away. She was immediately comforted by the support she received from her fellow classmates. “They were happy to offer me helpful tips as I experienced some roadblocks on the first night – like to put toothpaste directly in your mouth instead of struggling to get it on the toothbrush,” Fujishige said.

“A surprising challenge for me was being able to focus on having conversations. If other people were talking across the room, it made it hard to focus on who was talking in front of me. There is this idea that when you lose one sense, others become heightened. I don’t think my hearing was heightened, but because I couldn’t see, I was relying on it more than I normally would.”

—Sydney Fujishige

Now that she has an understanding of a student’s experience, she cannot wait to get to work. She is excited to apply the lessons she learned under blindfold to her growing experience as an instructor. “As I continue my apprenticeship, I can’t wait to be the person who trains these dogs that will give our students so much joy and independence. Fujishige continues, “It is a lot of responsibility, knowing I will be able to teach the dogs to keep our students safe. It evokes an intense feeling, and I want to be a part of their journey.” 🐾



GRADUATES (puppy raiser in parentheses):

Class #414



Nancy and Asta (Laurel & Chris Price), Dawson and Bauer (Lonnie Raimond & Jonathon Ogle), Guadalupe and Ethos (Shari Religa), Aisha and Bruce (Linda & Marty Ruggles), Dave and Nate (Sarah Jane & Chantal Chelin), Erika and Wiona (The Ghookhassian Family), Vanessa and Dewey (Thee Comeau & Jed Fuhrman), Phillip and Vergil (Suzy Hutton), James and Evie (Wendy & Tom Roy)

INSTRUCTORS: Tiffany Brundy, Sean Chiles, Kelsey Horst

EVENTS

Due to COVID-19 many of our annual events have been cancelled. However, we are excited to announce our

FIRST NATIONWIDE VIRTUAL EVENT **Walk, Run, Ride...Whatever!**

This fun event can be held anytime at your convenience during the weekend of July 31st – August 2nd.

This is an event that you can participate in regardless of your age or location. Check our website for further details and other upcoming events.



Shop GDA

To purchase, go to “Shop GDA” on guidedogsofamerica.org, or call (818) 833-6429.

HOLIDAY CARDS

Available in packs of 10 cards with 10 envelopes. Message on the back reads, “During this holiday season and throughout the new year... we wish you comfort, good health, and happiness.”

PRICE: \$15.00 + Shipping and handling





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of America**

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PARTNERS IN TRUST

Make your gift to Guide Dogs of America last a lifetime and beyond. The Partners in Trust Society was established by GDA to recognize and honor the generosity of those who have included us in their planned giving. Visit our website, or please call **Rhonda Bissell** at **(818) 833-6432** for more information.



2020 QUILT RAFFLE

This year's quilt, "How Much Is That Doggie In the Window?" was made and donated by the Orange County Quilt Guild. The colorful quilt measures 51 ½" by 62" and features 12 tiles with an adorable doggie in each window. If you would like to purchase raffle tickets, they are \$2 each or \$10 for six. Send your check to Guide Dogs of America, postmarked by Mon., November 30th, 2020, or call us at **(818) 833-6429**. Make sure to include a return address and phone number. The drawing will be held in early December. Winner to be notified by Friday, December 18th, 2020.



**OUR MISSION STATEMENT:
TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS WITH SERVICE DOGS.**