

Kitchener Today with Brian Bourke

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Local charity making service dogs more accessible to those with psychiatric, mental health diagnoses

18 minutes ago By: [Taylor Pace](#)



1 / 3 Partners with Paws founder Jacqueline Gori | Supplied photo

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Before moving to Canada from England, Partners with Paws founder Jacqueline Gori was diagnosed with a rare form of tuberculosis. She became very ill, and relied on a wheelchair to get around.

This was her first introduction to service dogs, where she was partnered with her mobility dog, Max.

She eventually moved to Canada with Max, settling in Cambridge.

“When we came to Canada, I wanted to give back because Max had changed my life so much,” Gori said. So, she became a fundraiser for National Service Dogs.

But in 2015, Max passed away, and traumatic childhood experiences she had formerly repressed began to resurface through flashbacks. She was diagnosed with PTSD, chronic anxiety, depression, and was highly suicidal.

Yet, because she wasn't a first responder or a veteran, she didn't qualify for a new service dog.

Because of her experience with Max and National Service Dogs, she was able to train her dog Samson to act as a service dog, teaching him behaviour intervention, nightmare intervention, pressure therapy, and retrieval of special objects, for example.

Samson was from Cooperslane, a breeder who specializes in breeding Labrador Retrievers to "be family companions and service dogs."

"I would not be alive today without this dog," she said. "And when I came away from that, I was like, somebody should write a book about Cooperslane."

But when she began sharing her story with others, she found that there were many people in the same situation as her, unable to qualify for service dogs or facing long wait times.

"And so there was this massive gap in the community," she said. "And so I was like ok, I need to do more than just write a book. I need to fill the gap in."

So, in October of 2020, she founded Partners with Paws, a charity dedicated to servicing people who have psychiatric and mental health diagnoses in southern Ontario by funding training and partnering them with service dogs.

As she learned in her own experience, service dogs can be life saving to those with mental health diagnoses.

"A lot of people who have PTSD, like myself, suffer from clinical depression and anxiety. So one of the tasks that dogs will do is deep pressure therapy," she said. "Deep pressure is known to boost serotonin, to lower cortisol, and to ground a person in the present.

"But just that one task can give a person the independence they need to perform daily life."

Dogs will perform deep pressure therapy by using their weight and warmth to mitigate psychiatric symptoms.

"It sounds silly to say, oh, my dog lays on my lap or chest and it makes a huge difference," said one of Gori's clients, Annie, who suffers from PTSD. "But that can be the difference between me having to take emergency medication and being out of commission for a day or two.

"He does much more than that, but that one simple task gives me so much more independence," she said.

"If it wasn't for [her service dog] Bear, she would never leave the house," Gori said.

But without Partners with Paws, she would likely have never been paired up with a service dog: not being a veteran or first responder, she didn't qualify for one elsewhere, and couldn't afford to front the \$20,000 herself.

"The donation not only helped me get Bear, but also made me realize people are kind and want to help. And it certainly has inspired me to want to help others," Annie said. "It changed my life."

Beyond deep pressure therapy, "dogs also do other tasks like finding an exit," Gori said. "If you're having a panic attack, they interrupt behaviour. If you're anxious, a lot of people scratch or pick at skin or they self harm, the dogs are trained to intervene. But just the fact that you have a dog by your side to help you get through into society is huge."

Besides the fact that they service people with mental health, regardless of whether they are veterans or first responders, there are a few things that make Partners with Paws different from bigger charities.

For instance, there are different levels of funding people can apply for.

"A lot of individuals that come to Partners With Paws have been fundraising already, and so I just cover the rest, or up to half; sometimes the whole amount. So it's a lot more flexible than the big charities," she said.

They also allow people to train their own dogs if they wish, meaning clients can bring their puppies to classes, where the trainer takes them through the process of service dog training.

"Which means you get matched faster, and you build that bond and rapport with your dog a lot faster. But also, you get the skill on how to train your dog, so when your dog needs a little bit of a tune up, you actually have the ability to do that," she said.

On top of working full-time as an artist and landlord, Gori runs the charity with no staff.

“So when people donate money, 100 per cent of their donations go towards the clients,” she said. “And I contract out the training to two very well-known trainers.”

So far, they have raised \$40,000 and trained and partnered five service dogs.

You can learn more about Partners with Paws and how to help [here](#).

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