

# COURAGEOUS K9





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# My Journey with Courageous Companions

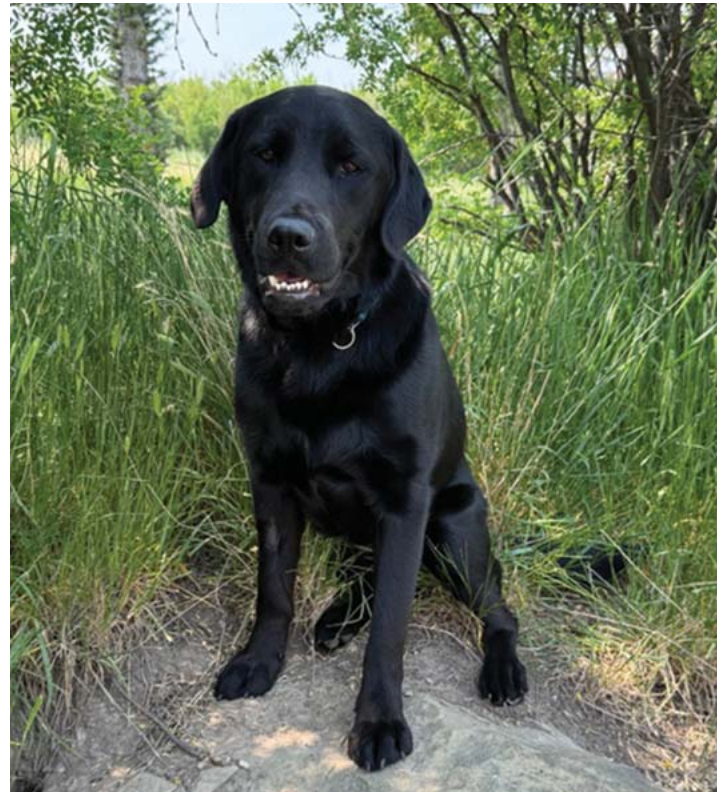
By Julie Letal, Chairperson of the Board

My name is Julie Letal, and I proudly serve as the new Chairperson on the Board of Directors for Courageous Companions. My journey with this incredible organization began in 2017 when I was paired with my first service dog, K9 Chance.

At the time, I was serving with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), a career I had dedicated over 20 years of my life. Like many first responders, I had witnessed more than my share of traumatic incidents, scenes that stay with you long after your shift ends. The toll was significant. I was eventually diagnosed with an Operational Stress Injury (OSI), a term that encompasses the psychological impact of serving in high-stress environments, particularly in uniformed service.

The symptoms crept into every corner of my life: anxiety, depression, hyper-vigilance, nightmares, and a deep sense of isolation. Even simple tasks like grocery shopping or attending social events became overwhelming. I had lost the joy in things I once loved.

That all began to change the day I was introduced to K9 Chance. She wasn't just a service dog; she became my anchor.



Her presence brought me calm, helped regulate my anxiety, and allowed me to re-engage with the world. She gave me back pieces of myself I thought were gone forever. It's no exaggeration to say she lifted a heavy weight off my shoulders and helped me begin the path to healing.

K9 Chance is now enjoying a well-earned retirement, and I've recently begun training with my new service dog, K9 Lloyd. He's a big, affectionate guy, equal parts gentle giant and devoted companion, and he's adjusting wonderfully to his new role. Being involved with Courageous Companions not only gave me back my life, but it also gave me purpose beyond the badge. Today, I'm honoured to help guide this organization and advocate for others walking similar paths. We are not alone, and with the right support, including a loyal four-legged partner by your side, healing is possible.

# Message from the Executive Director Courageous Companions

Welcome to the Eighth Edition of Courageous K9 Magazine

2025 has been a year of both challenges and triumphs for Courageous Companions. I am incredibly proud of the dedication demonstrated by our team, stakeholders, donors, and volunteers, which has enabled us to achieve the following milestones in 2025:

- 2 new trained service dogs paired with new handlers
- 2 emergency replacements due to age or illness
- 5 new Owner Trainer Teams graduated
- 2 new Facility Dogs graduated
- 7 teams passed recertifications (required every three years)
- 13 new teams completed Public Access Testing (PAT) and have entered the program

Since our founding in 2016, Courageous Companions has been dedicated to providing service dogs to veterans and first responders. The cost of a service dog can range from \$20,000 to \$30,000, depending on the type of disability and the recipient's location, with training taking up to a year and often requiring travel. Donations are vital for us to continue placing these life-changing dogs with our injured Canadian heroes.

We take great pride in our commitment to ensuring that approximately 90% of all funding goes directly towards the placement of service dogs. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has supported our fundraising efforts and contributed to making 2025 a successful year for Courageous Companions.

Thank you for your continued support.

John Dugas (K9 Jester)

Executive Director  
Courageous Companions



# Sinead Zalitach and K9 Foreman



My name is Sinead, and I'm proud to serve on the Board of Directors for Courageous Companions, an organization that changes lives every single day by pairing highly trained service dogs with military veterans, first responders, as well as people like me who live with disabilities.

I grew up in Ontario, the daughter of a Juvenile Corrections worker and a psychiatric nurse, two people who taught me the importance of service, resilience, and compassion. I also happen to live with a rare, life-threatening and congenital condition called Parkes Weber Syndrome. It affects my lymphatic, vascular, arterial, and musculoskeletal systems, and while there is no cure, I've found hope, healing, and independence in a way I never imagined, through the love and loyalty of a service dog.

After exhausting every medically recommended treatment, including skin grafts, IV treatments, surgical debridement, and compression therapy, I trained my first service dog, K9 Paddington. Paddington wasn't just my partner, he was my lifeline. He would detect infections, dangerous heart rate changes and by applying pressure to my lower leg using his body weight, Paddington helped wounds on my foot heal that, in over 10+ years, specialists around the world couldn't. He quite literally helped keep me out of the hospital and brought stability into my life when everything else had failed. He retired early due to health issues, but his legacy lives on.

In 2019, I was paired with K9 Foreman through MSAR and Courageous Companions. Foreman is an extraordinary Medical Detection and Mobility Dog. He's trained to assist me with daily tasks like picking up dropped items and opening doors, as well

as detecting life-threatening blood clots, infections, and even responding to hemorrhaging while I sleep. He's woken me up in the middle of the night, brought me emergency medical supplies, and saved my life more times than I can count. I truly believe I wouldn't be here today without him.

In 2022, Foreman was recognized on a national level for his bravery and unwavering devotion. He was inducted into the Purina Animal Hall of Fame, a prestigious honour reserved for animals who have saved a human life. He's more than my service dog, he's my hero.

My journey with Courageous Companions has taken me across Canada, from Ottawa to Winnipeg to Alberta, and every step of the way, I have been met with kindness, expert training, and a powerful sense of community. Courageous Companions isn't just a program. It's a lifeline.

And none of it would be possible without you.

These life-saving dogs are provided at no cost to the people who need them; however, they take time, dedication, and resources to train. That's where you come in.

When you donate to Courageous Companions, you're not just supporting a cause, you're becoming part of a life-changing journey. You're joining the mission. You become a Courageous Companion too. Whether it's \$20 or \$200, your gift helps train incredible dogs like Foreman and Paddington, and gives someone the chance to live with safety, dignity, and freedom.

Please consider donating today.  
Because your generosity doesn't just make a difference,  
*it is the difference.*



# A Tribute to George Leonard

Submitted by Sinead Zalitach

It is a true honour, and a deeply emotional task, to write a tribute for George Leonard of MSAR. Finding the words to express the weight of this loss has not been easy. How do you write a farewell when you haven't yet accepted that someone so impactful, so constant, is truly gone? How do you capture the legacy of someone who quite literally changed lives, mine included?

I first connected with George many years ago, during a particularly vulnerable time in my life. My family and I had been taken advantage of by a fraudulent service dog organization. We were devastated, disillusioned, and unsure where to turn. Then came George. Before we even met in person, he reached out with a simple but powerful message: "How can I help?" That was who he was. Generous without condition. Steady when the world felt unstable.

What began as an offer of assistance grew into something so much more. George became a mentor. He didn't just teach me how to train and test service dogs; he taught me how to trust again. He believed in me before I knew how to believe in myself. And somewhere in between learning to read dog behaviour and understanding how to meet a handler's unique needs, George also became my friend.

Since his sudden passing this past spring, I've realized that this story is not mine alone. So many people have shared their own "George stories," and a pattern has emerged, he was a mentor, a helper, a cheerleader, a second chance, a lifeline. A man who gave of himself endlessly and asked for little in return. He had this rare ability to meet people exactly where they were and then guide them to where they could be.

His loss has left a void not just in the service dog world, but in the lives of everyone he touched. I still find myself asking, "What would George do?" or "Who do I call now?" This summer will be the first in many years that I won't be travelling to Winnipeg to work with George, and the absence feels surreal. He was always the one who reminded me, "Just because you have a disability doesn't mean you can't do something. We'll find you a job." He showed me that having limitations didn't mean being limited, that everyone had value, and everyone deserved opportunity. George used to joke that no one was completely useless, because at the very least, they could be used as an example. Even in his humour, there was wisdom and a drive to uplift people who had been overlooked or cast aside.



Summers with George were unforgettable. Whether we were driving out to Skinner's for hot dogs in his beloved convertible, working with dogs, filming for documentaries or having quiet conversations on his deck about life, philosophy, or how to improve accessibility for others, there was always purpose, always insight, and always humour. He had a gift for placing the right dog with the right person, and he took on cases that others wouldn't. Time and time again, I heard the same phrase from those he helped: "George saved my life."

And he did. He saved lives, human and canine. He gave people their freedom, their dignity, and their hope back.

There will never be another George Leonard. But those of us who were lucky enough to know him carry pieces of him forward, in the dogs we work with, in the people we support, and in the quiet moments when we remember to ask, "How can I help?"

Thank you, George, for all you have done. You are missed more than words can ever say your legacy continues to live on in each life you touched.

# From the Fire Line to the Front Lines of Healing: My Journey with Koda and Trixie

By Sarah Ives

My name is Sarah, and I'm a retired firefighter with five years of proud service. During my career, I progressed through the ranks from EMR to firefighter, pump engineer, Lieutenant, and Instructor. I worked in a one-of-a-kind composite department that blended municipal and industrial fire services, one of the first of its kind in Canada. I was honoured to be part of a forward-thinking team and to serve my community at that level.

But like many first responders, the demands of the job eventually caught up with me. Years of high-stress calls, long shifts, and being constantly on duty began to affect my mental health. I was later diagnosed with PTSD and a traumatic brain injury, the result of cumulative exposure to trauma, stress, and the intense pressure of the role.



In the middle of this journey, I had a rescue dog named Koda. What started as companionship quickly evolved into something much more. Koda began naturally supporting me during panic attacks and emotional distress. Without training, he would anchor me, interrupt harmful behaviors, and help ground me in the moment. He was always there - steady, loyal, and responsive.

Eventually, through therapy, I realized just how vital Koda had become to my well-being. That's when I discovered Courageous Companions, a nonprofit dedicated to pairing veterans and first responders with service dogs. Koda was evaluated and accepted into their Owner-Trainer Program, and from there, we officially became a Service Dog Team.

The structure, guidance, and support provided by Courageous Companions made all the difference. Koda's presence, paired with formal training, gave me a sense of control and independence I hadn't felt in years.

When it came time for Koda to retire, I was filled with uncertainty and grief. But Courageous Companions stepped in again and placed me with K9 Trixie, a professionally trained school dog. That transition changed everything.

Trixie arrived prepared, calm, and focused, ready to work in a way that was consistent and deeply reassuring. The contrast between owner-training and receiving a professionally trained service dog was profound. Her immediate understanding of tasks and ability to respond to my needs showed just how skilled the trainers at Courageous Companions are.



It was through working with Trixie that I truly saw the emotional toll Koda had carried. As devoted as he was, he had learned his tasks through necessity, not training. I would never wish that kind of pressure on any dog. That's why professional training is so important, it ensures dogs are taught in healthy, sustainable ways to support their handlers without taking on trauma themselves.

Today, I still teach part-time as a fire service instructor, and I share one of the most important lessons I've learned: your health matters. You don't need to be the one on call 24/7 to prove your worth. Take care of your mental wellness. Use your Employee Assistance Programs. Speak up if you're struggling. And never underestimate the power of a well-trained service dog and the community behind them.

Thanks to Koda, Trixie, and Courageous Companions, I'm not only here - I'm healing, thriving, and continuing to serve in a new way.

# Katherine Freeman and K9 Rory-Michael

Written by Katherine Freeman

I was introduced to Courageous Companions through their Owner Trainer Program. I am a First Responder, Inter-faith Chaplain, Counselor and Disaster Management Supervisor. I have been involved at many International Disasters, responding to earthquakes, landslides, floods, wildfires and other natural disasters.

I was the founder of a group providing counselling to torture survivors and their families at the Calgary Children's Hospital for years. I have also tried to give back to my community by being involved with Change for Children and Disaster Management with the Red Cross.

I was a First Responder in New York City at 9/11 after the towers fell. My lungs were injured from inhaling poisonous toxins at ground zero and my immune system was compromised from trying to fight off the toxins in my body.

I personally trained Rory-Michael from a puppy to become my steadfast Service Dog. He has saved my life on several occasions when I have gone into full blown pulmonary arrest.

I taught Rory-Michael to detect, alert and rescue me if there is a drop in my oxygen levels. He carries a pulse oximeter on his collar so I can access my levels when he alerts me. Rory is also trained to detect and respond to stress hormones, offering comfort and support.

Needless to say, I don't leave my house or spend a minute alone without the vigilant support of my Service Dog Rory-Michael. Rory is trained in life saving tasks and to help manage my Occupational Stress Injury (OSI).

Courageous Companions has helped me personally with their continued friendship, camaraderie and emotional support. They have helped Rory-Michael and I form an unbreakable bond forged in love and trust.

Katherine Freeman.



# Keith and K9 Bart



Meet K9 Bart. Bart is my six-year-old golden doodle and service dog. Before talking about him, maybe I could fill you in as to how K9 Bart and I came to be a team.

I spent 40 years as an emergency responder working as a firefighter, paramedic then finished after 17 years with the RCMP as an auxiliary constable.

During the years I held several positions from a front-line paramedic to EMS Chief / Director. While working in the EMS profession I became the Provincial Director of Disaster Health Services. Throughout my career I dealt with hundreds if not thousands of critical incidents. Early in my career the horrors that we dealt with were just considered part of the job and were never spoken of. It was during my stint in disaster management I was introduced with Critical Incident Stress Management by the folks at Alberta Emergency Health (EHS) following the infamous Edmonton tornado. After the tornado, EHS worked collaboratively with Emergency Social Service in developing a Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) program to help responders work thru the stress of working on serious critical events. Seeing the need in our province I was able lay down the groundwork to implement a CISM program in my home province. This work was instrumental in teaching me that the stresses responders face is real and can take its toll on them and their families.

The good thing about this is that I personally learned enough (I thought) to deal with rigours of public safety. I was wrong. In 2015 I noticed changes in myself. Not very nice changes either. Changes that changed my life negatively. After speaking with my doctor, I was diagnosed with PTSD. I was confused, how and why me. After all, I thought I knew about the stress I was exposed to. Luckily, I was fortunate to have an excellent medical team in my corner, and I approached the challenge as I always had, dive in headfirst and fix it. Unfortunately, that just didn't apply to this monster. I took countless medications and received all the treatments available for PTSD and even some experimental ones. I attended a 6-week residential treatment program where I was immersed in the most up to date therapies available.

Despite the great care I received I was still plagued with terrible symptoms. It was in 2019 I first heard about service dogs working with people experiencing PTSD on the TV show W5.

The work these dogs were doing was intriguing but unfortunately these trained service dogs came with a high price tag around the \$30,000 mark. Realizing this was out of reach for me financially,

I contacted my provincial Workers Compensation and asked for support, but they turned down my request. Following this I reached out to MSAR, and they referred me to Courageous Companions.

While I was learning about Courageous Companions I spoke with a breeder and with their support, I acquired a pup that they felt had the aptitude for service dog work. The pup was evaluated by MSAR and they felt "Bart" was a suitable candidate as a prospective service dog.

Around that time, I was entered and accepted into the Courageous Companions owner training program as I felt being involved with the training may benefit my recovery. With the help of Courageous Companions and MSAR trainers I spent hundreds of hours over the next year training Bart. The extensive training allowed me to interact with other handlers and trainers working to refine the necessary skills that a SD must master. Everything from basic / advanced obedience to strict public access training and task work to mitigate my symptoms. In November 2022 Bart passed his two-day final exams and was certified as a service dog by Courageous Companions.

Bart has changed my life. I went from living in my basement in avoidance to being able to get out and socialize with family and friends (even if just occasionally). Things as simple as family birthdays were now possible for me to attend. K9 Bart basically gave a part of my life back. I could do simple things like go to a store or a restaurant, something that was a hard to do in the past.

I still have PTSD and likely always will. The therapy has given me the tools to help deal with the symptoms, but Bart is my constant.

Always there, always watching my back and quick to react when I am having a hard time. You could say he gave me a big part of my life back.

The work that Courageous Companions is passionate about doing, truly does make a difference in the lives of people that need the support, and is second to none.

Thank you, Courageous Companions, for giving me so much. My life is better because of your work.

# Kyle Dalum and K9 Bob



Written by Kyle Dalum

My name is Kyle Dalum, and I joined the Canadian Combat Engineers at 18 years of age. I have often said that if they had left me on tour I would still be in the Army.

With hold appreciation for my brothers and sisters, and a great love for having done my job for real. It was a lifestyle like no other...

After my service I was lost and often felt the pull back to military life. With this feeling of loss, I felt a part of me was missing. After several years, a Veteran advocate approached me with an offer that there was help for people like him, like us.

The prospect of help was terrifying. I didn't help existed or that others were struggling too. This turned out to be an incredible opportunity. I was diagnosed with OSI, depression, and anxiety among other things.

With help and a lot of work, my life started to improve. With that improvement came the understanding that I was not alone and there were programs trying to make a difference in people's

lives. I poured myself into peer support and volunteerism, doing my best to help others. My drive of service carried over from my work in the military.

It was around this point that I applied to Courageous Companions and was accepted under the Owner Trained program. I would never have dreamed the impact a service dog would have on my life.

With the utmost gratitude, I continue to do my best to give back to this organization and feel that it has been a doorway to saving my life.

My existence in its entirety pivoted on the influence of being able to be a part of the Courageous Companions Owner Trained program with my dog, Phelan. She learned to be "there" when I needed her most.

A mistake I made in my journey was thinking being busy was helpful, but I took on more than I could handle, and continually drove myself toward burnout.

Through this lesson I learned being busy is good, but balance is the goal within reality.

Unfortunately, Phelan who passed all her service dog testing had been diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. She died but the experiences, and teachings from her continue to echo through my life.

Fortunately, Courageous Companions had an emergency service dog replacement for me. His name is Bob.

With big paws to fill and new wisdom to learn, K9 Bob has shown me the past cannot be an expectation of the future.

A service dog K9 may not be the fix, but at the right time it can make a huge difference.

"These dogs save lives ... like mine."



# Michelle McKeaveney and K9 Scotter



Written by Michelle McKeaveney

My name is Michelle McKeaveney, and from the moment I reached out to George, who helped pioneer the service dog movement in Canada, he listened with compassion to what had happened to me and, understanding my needs, encouraged me to connect with

John Dugas at Courageous Companions. John and his team supported and encouraged me while I awaited the arrival and service dog preparation of K9 Scooter.

It would be a complete understatement to state that this dog completely changed my life in more ways than I can possibly share.

I am the wife of a Veteran who also served as a Correctional Officer for 26+ years, and a mother of three incredible adult humans.

I convoked from the University of Regina in 1993 with a Bachelor of Social Work and then went on to have a 25+ year career as a Correctional Officer in a women's prison. During my employment, I was assaulted by an inmate, which resulted in me being diagnosed with PTSD/Operational Stress Injury. My life took a U-turn, and I went from fun and free loving to not wanting to be around people, mistrusting everyone, and always afraid of someone or something potentially causing me harm.

I pushed through and continued to do the work toward the goal of post-traumatic growth. I struggled until I was given my hero with four legs. Ironically, Canine Scooter was born on June 27, PTSD Awareness Day, 2017, and I was paired with him in October 2019. We have been a team ever since, and I don't know where I would be without him.

Together, he has been my assistant and helped me create a safe space for all first responders, Veterans, etc., to have respite.

We now have a charity. It is called River Valley Resilience Retreat. It was founded in 2019, and today we have a beautiful 26-acre property with five cabins, river access, and a serene place for

others like me to find their footing and get grounded in nature amongst peers who understand the struggles and strife. I would not have been able to achieve any of my goals so far without having him by my side. He accompanies me for all my speaking engagements, as well as when I sing at functions in my community and other places and has become a well-known "tool" for me in my city and the first responder community in Saskatchewan.

I am so proud to be his handler, and I look forward to taking care of him after he is done service, and we can enjoy our retirement together.

My family agrees that my life changed for the better when Scooter came into it. Service dogs change lives. They make lives better.

"Thank you" is not enough to Courageous Companions for being such a knowledgeable, first-class organization and ongoing resource for all of us in this service dog family.



# Thank you to our advertisers

To our incredible advertisers

Your support of Courageous Companions K9 Magazine means more than words can express. You didn't just fill space, you filled hearts. Your generosity directly contributes to placing professionally trained, life-saving service dogs with qualified Canadians whose lives have been forever changed by trauma, injury, or service-related challenges, individuals carefully matched through our mission and high standards.

Each advertisement you place helps us share stories of courage, raise national awareness, and brings hope where it's needed most. You've helped restore dignity, freedom, and independence to those who have served our communities and country. That's no small thing, that's life changing.

To Warren and the remarkable team at Acclaim Marketing, your partnership is nothing short of extraordinary. The heart, creativity, and skill you bring to every issue has elevated our voice and our mission. You've helped us bring our message to life in a way that is professional, beautiful, and deeply impactful. We are beyond grateful.

To our advertisers once more, your continued belief in our mission allows us to do what we do best: serve those who've served us. Your support is not taken for granted. You are part of this story, and part of this impact.

With sincere appreciation,  
The Courageous Companions Team

