

Joni Bonilla · Helping Veterans Every Day

BY JENNA CAPUTO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZANE KRUMANOCKER



Joni Bonilla always wanted a dog growing up but was never allowed to have one. Originally from Winthrop, MA, she luckily had a neighbor with a Scottie named Bo, and she would go over to their house every day to play with him.

She also loved to play outside. Despite living right on the ocean just outside of Boston, her favorite part about her yard was the trees. “Our yard had great trees!” she says. “One had a tire swing, one looked like a dragon and another had the perfect makings of a hobbit house.”

In 1999, she finally got her first dog, Buck, after her friend’s neighbor picked him up from the middle of the highway. “That dog changed my whole life. I didn’t know anything about dog training, so I bought a book and it dominated from there,” she says.

After living in Watertown for a year, she realized she liked New York State and decided not to go back to Boston. Not feeling like much of a farmer, she looked around and decided that the Capital District would be the best compromise of both worlds and settled in Niskayuna in 2004. She continued to work with dogs throughout her entire adult life, starting by working at a shelter in North Carolina and reading every dog training book she could find for years. She eventually went to North Shore Community College, majoring in Animal Care, and continues to attend seminars and conferences to stay current. In 2015, she decided

to start Operation At Ease (OAE) after trying to help her friend who had recently retired from the Army. His pet dog passed away shortly after his retirement. “He asked me to help him find a new dog since he found so many benefits to having her,” she explains. “He said she would nudge his hand when he was lying in a dark room after his wife and kids left for the day. Since he had to take her out – for walks, to get dog food, etc. – she got him moving again. When I started looking, I was met with a lot of politics, waiting lists and red tape. The average wait list is five years and/or over \$20,000 out of pocket. We lose over a million dogs every year to euthanasia and an average of 22 veterans a day to suicide. There is no reason for this. So, I decided I would just do it myself.”

OAE is a not-for-profit organization that takes dogs from shelters and pairs them with veterans while also providing a free, guided training program for post-traumatic stress and light mobility service dogs. Wanting to keep OAE different from other service organizations, Joni bypasses the long waiting lists and huge price tags. OAE holds four orientations a year, and the dog and any training are given to the veteran completely free of charge. Since the program is guided, the veterans come with their dogs to weekly training sessions for an intense program that lasts a minimum of six months (usually closer to eight). The teams are tested a total of three times to uphold the integrity of the



service dog. The lessons are held both within the classroom setting as well as throughout the Capital District, not only to train the dogs, but also to help the veterans with their own transitions and to provide support as they get back into doing day-to-day-life things that can otherwise be hard after they get back home.

Joni explains that post-traumatic stress is often a very misunderstood condition, and the media adds to the stigma. She hates the term Post Traumatic Stress "Disorder" because that implies something that is medically unnatural. "Post-traumatic stress is the brain's normal and healthy response to trauma. It's what your body is hardwired to do to keep you safe. So often it's treated like this dangerous inflection. Combat veterans aren't dangerous people. They aren't plagued with mental illness. Their brains are simply

having a normal and healthy reaction to the trauma that they experienced," she explains. "The dogs help with the depression and the isolation. Our program gets them out of the house. It helps with the hypervigilance. They provide companionship, deep pressure for anxiety, crowd buffering – they provide something different for each person.

OAE's dog training classes are open to the public, and in addition to a list of events coming up in 2020, they will be holding their biggest fundraiser of the year this November 8th at Glennpeter's Diamond Center. The event will include a silent auction and super raffle.

Joni loves being able to provide a service that is so influential in veterans' lives. The people are the best part about her job. "I have an awesome team of trainers, the world's most spectacular and compassionate

volunteers and a clientele that can't be beat. Sprinkle some dogs on top and I never feel like I'm at work!"

When she's not training the dogs with the veterans, Joni is out there advocating for them. This was an unexpected part of the job, but a daily one as she advocates for their rights to have a service dog. She's constantly problem solving and helping them with resources.

She is also passionate about people having access to kind and affordable dog training. She wants to combat against all the misinformation and outdated methods that regularly circulate in the public. "I always say you wouldn't use a cell phone carrier that only offered flip phones or use a hairdresser that recommended mullets!" she explains. She warns people to avoid programs that use aversive methods to changing dog behaviors.

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She does not advocate any forceful methods and urges people to ask their potential trainer for their credentials. She says to make sure they are not only educated, but that they stay current with the latest methods and procedures. “Dog training is really relationship building,” she explains. “No relationship is ever made stronger by fear.”

When she’s not at work, Joni loves spending time with her family. Her husband, Matt Gleason, is a Technical Sergeant in the US Air Force. He deploys twice a year – in the fall/winter for three months, and in the summer for about two weeks. She also has two children – Taitum Bonilla (13) and Braeson Bonilla (11), as well as two dogs – Wonder Mutt and Chubby Cow. Joni and Taitum recently signed up for Taekwondo and are loving it. But generally, they are all homebodies when they are not at work or school. Taitum loves to sketch and paint and Braeson can often be found building with Legos or baking in the kitchen. He especially loves brownies and hopes to one day open his own café.

Taitum is also a ventriloquist. She was always great at voice impressions from characters like Stitch, Minnie Mouse and Dora, so Joni got her a puppet (Arnold) and a book on ventriloquism. Taitum is proving to have quite the talent with it!

Joni loves to spend time outdoors and even used that as a requirement when they were looking for their house. She wanted to be sure that they were in walking distance to a hiking trail. They ended up buying a perfectly situated house on Niska Isle, right off the bike path and with the Mohawk River at the end of her driveway.

They also love to travel together. Because of his work, Matt has so far visited every continent except for one, but as a family, they are working on travelling to every state in the country. On their first family vacation, they bought a map of the USA from an antique shop, and now they put a pin in it each time they visit a new state.

In addition to travelling and spending time with her family, Joni also loves to crochet, read, walk her dogs and prepare for Christmas. She listens to Christmas music year-round and starts planning usually in April of every year since she now makes sure everyone on her list gets a homemade gift. “I used to resent Christmas,” she says. “It’s big and expensive and commercial. Then I just decided one day that it wasn’t going anywhere so I had to take it back and find some joy in it again. The first year I made everyone jarred pancake mix and kitchen angels. Since then many different things, like blankets or ornaments – it depends on what I’m in the mood for.”

She also loves to collect buttons. She started collecting buttons about 12-13 years ago when she bought a big tin of buttons at a yard sale. Since then, she has built an impressive collection, separating them into the ones that anyone can use for crafts and then the real collector ones that no one is allowed to touch. She is also now a member of The National Button Society.

Regardless of what she is doing in life, Joni always tries to stay true to herself and that has made decision making so much easier. “My dad once told me, if it’s not easy, it’s not meant to be. Walk away from it. That simplified so much for me.” ■

If you would like to help Joni with her work at OAE, contact them at <https://www.operationatease.org>.

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