

Sonya Ward —Always There,



Ibi Semper is a Latin phrase meaning “Always There.” It’s a phrase that has become a motto for Sonya Ward and now also for all the people—and dogs—she helps along the way.

Sonya’s early life included a lot of moving around. Originally from Landshut, Germany, Sonya’s family followed her father’s job, living in Germany, France, and the US as well as traveling in between. Learning new languages and making friends were constantly on her mind, but Sonya also loved to collect stamps from around the world, go horseback riding, work on her photography, and of course, be with dogs.

When she got her own puppy, she took it to puppy classes then began volunteering for an organization that worked with veterans with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). The topic intrigued her, so she started an ongoing pursuit to learn more about this condition that affects about eight million people a year. PTSD is the body’s natural reaction after a traumatic event, often resulting in anxiety; depression; isolation; intense, emotional reactions; and sometimes even thoughts of suicide. As she learned more about the condition,

she researched the laws pertaining to service animals. She attended conferences, watched training videos, registered with the American Kennel Club (AKC), and continues to work on her national dog trainer certification.

She immersed herself in the experience of working with veterans and their dogs. “I believe the veterans have taught me as much as I have taught them,” she says. “The commitment, resilience, and dedication are inspiring to me. Dogs love unconditionally, and the change in shelter/rescue dogs and humans working together, growing and bonding—relying on each other on good days and bad days—is what makes it all worth it.”

Word spread, and Sonya found more and more veterans throughout the community coming to her for help in training their dogs. She decided to start her own non-profit organization, Ibi Semper Training (IST), that could help both veterans and shelter/rescue dogs at

Changing Lives & Building Bonds

BY JENNA CAPUTO — PHOTOS BY ANGELA MIA PHOTOGRAPHY & CONTRIBUTED BY THE WARD FAMILY

the same time, and importantly, at a much lower cost and lower waiting list time than other places. At the start of the pandemic, she also added first responders to the list of applicants. Matching applicants with temperament tested rescue dogs, IST then offers a guided training program at no cost to the newly paired team. If the applicant already owns a dog they would like to train as a PTSD service dog, IST will conduct a temperament test to make sure their pet qualifies for the training program. The program spans eight months, and at the end, each participant has a fully individualized, task-trained service dog to help them through their PTSD symptoms and to ease some of the anxieties that life can bring. All fees are covered by IST.

“Service dogs are very much misunderstood,” says Sonya. “Their job pertains only to the handler and has federal rights according to the America with Disabilities Act. They are not pets; according to law they are considered medical equipment and are allowed to go anywhere the public is allowed. Only two questions can be asked of a person with a service dog— 1. Is this your service dog? (*Answer: Yes/No*); 2. What work has the animal been trained to perform? (*Answer: It is a PTSD service dog.*) Businesses cannot discriminate because of allergies or fear.

The effects of the program can be seen right away, and the team members are so grateful. 13-year Air Force Veteran, Blair Sass, didn't think her boxer/pit bull mix, Remington, would be able to do it. He was a stubborn dog and didn't want to listen to any command, especially the down command. But Sonya insisted that he could do it and urged Blair to keep working. Within just the first week, they saw vast improvement. “Sonya truly has a way of connecting with her teams to help them build a special bond and get them working together to get the best results possible,” says Blair. “Sonya truly cares about each one of her teams. She pours her heart and soul into training. Sonya is very understanding,

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and her compassion and her willingness to want to help those of us trying to get our lives after service back together and have somewhat of a normal life again is truly amazing!”

IST also attends vendor events for outreach and advocacy, using fundraisers, donations, and grants to support their program. Besides restaurant fundraisers, they host many other events including an annual motorcycle ride, trivia nights, a customized cookbook for sale with their teams’ favorite recipes, and attending vendor events like the Suicide Prevention Run, Pet Fest, and Operation Adopt a Soldier.

The pandemic, of course, brought unexpected challenges to their mission, but it also presented new opportunities to network online, and IST has now partnered with other organizations to

offer different experiences and training facilities for their teams. They even continued training throughout lockdown virtually and are now able to bring the training back out into the Capital Region.

There are plenty of opportunities for the community to help as well. IST assists teams in need with donations of dog food, training treats, and dog toys. They also appreciate any volunteers willing to help with training in the classroom, assisting with vendor events, or offering professional expertise or referrals. IST has an Amazon Wishlist for those interested, and they participate in the Amazon Smile and GE gift giving programs.

Sonya is involved in other aspects of the community as well. She volunteers with the Niskayuna Friends of German parent group, supporting the German program at Niskayuna High School. It is an active group that participates every year at NiskaDay as well as taking the students to march at the annual NYC German American Steuben Parade and to the German Haus in NYC to the annual study abroad info day.

Sonya still keeps up with her photography and has been a member and past Board member of the Schenectady Photographic Society. She has taken photographs of various events throughout the Albany area and has had three of her patriotic photos displayed as part of the Arts4Vets collaboration with the UnitingUS Veterans Art Exhibit. One of her photos hung at the Military Women’s Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery and one at Mayvin, VA. She also has volunteered with the Arts4Vets group, which is a veteran-founded art group out of the American Legion Post 1520.

She met her husband, Michael Ward, an engineer, on a blind date in Phoenix, AZ in 1998, and they have been together ever since. They now have two children—Andrew (19), a college student at Quinnipiac University, and Susan (16), a 10th grader at Niskayuna High School. Their family also includes an aquarium of fish and Lucky, their 6-year-old Golden Retriever.

Michael and Susan are both artists. The Wards’ house is decorated with the family’s paintings and photographs, and Susan has completed paintings for her friends and to display as part of the high school art shows.

Travel is still a big part of Sonya’s life. They visit with Michael’s family at Rehoboth Beach in Delaware every year as well as trips out to see Sonya’s family in Europe and Australia. Sonya has traveled to all the continents so far except for



Antarctica, which is still on her list. She has visited 29 countries. She loves it all and doesn't really have one favorite place, but she does love the diversity in scenery, culture, and culinary delights in the US and is always happy to visit family as a tourist in other parts of the world.

When at home, she likes to attend different cultural events in the Capital District and shop at the various arts and crafts events throughout the year. She also has been enjoying researching their family history. Sometimes it is a mystery game since Germany has strong privacy laws. She may have to embark on a research trip to Europe to finish her search, but in the meantime, she has found that Michael is related to European royalty and can trace his family back for 33 generations.

Sonya is grateful for the opportunity to expand her reach and to continue helping those in need, since that has always been a passion of hers in any form. She hopes that in the future there will be an increased and improved mental health coverage as well as an increase in public awareness to reduce the debilitating stigma associated not only with PTSD but with mental health in general. "The pandemic has only increased the demand for mental health services across all ages and socio-economic levels," she says.

Until then, she urges all readers to know at least the basic facts about service dogs:

- Always ask PRIOR to petting any dog; don't assume it is ok.
- Service dogs are working dogs and not pets.
- Businesses NEED to be aware of the laws pertaining to working dogs and know that there are more than just seeing-eye dogs that are considered service dogs. There is still a lot of misconception in workplaces and unfamiliarity pertaining to service dogs.
- There is NO Federal/State registry for service dogs, no ID cards.

Businesses should go one step more and learn about the laws regarding service animals in the workplace.

Want to be a part of the IST mission? Visit ibisempertraining.org to find out more or to contact them with any questions.

