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TOP STORY

Queensbury veteran finds new battle buddy in successor dog

GRETTA HOCHSPRUNG Special to The Post-Star
Jan 14, 2021



Queensbury veteran Kevin Conlon works with his successor service dog, Nova, at the Educated Canines Assisting with Disabilities training center in Connecticut in December.

Provided photo

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QUEENSBURY — Kevin Conlon has been blown up five times.

While serving his second tour in Iraq in 2006, Conlon had to navigate terrain dotted with improvised explosive devices.

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“Pretty much anytime we went out, we’d find IEDs,” he said. “Almost every single time. And sometimes, yeah, not the fun way.”

Two of the blasts knocked the Queensbury man out cold. He suffered a traumatic brain injury and still struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder.

After he was discharged, he found relief in the assistance of a service dog named Dior, a golden Lab, golden retriever mix. The two were connected through Educated Canines Assisting with Disabilities, a nonprofit organization in Connecticut.

Conlon spent a week training with the dog and graduated from ECAD’s Project HEAL Program.

“I really do not do great with crowds,” said Conlon, who has trouble shopping in a bustling supermarket or attending school functions. His wife, Jenny, would often go without him.

Tree lines pose a problem for him as well.

“She could sometimes find me out there just staring off into the distance just watching the tree line,” Conlon said.

He is a defensive driver and swerves violently to avoid anything in the lane. He is also plagued with road rage.

While in Iraq, Conlon lost his roommate to a suicide bomber, and since his death, Conlon finds it difficult to maintain friendships.

“I don’t have local friends. Zero,” Conlon said. “I don’t want to get close to anybody.”

Dior was able to help Conlon with daily activities like accompanying him to the grocery store, standing between him and other people, distracting him from chaos or loud noises around him.

Conlon was suffering from back problems, and Dior helped retrieve items he dropped around the house.

Dior served as Conlon’s service dog for six years.

“He started acting a little strange, coughing, breathing heavily,” said Conlon, who found out the dog had cancer, which had spread throughout his body.

Within a week, Conlon had to put Dior down, which was devastating for the Army veteran, who relied greatly on the canine.

Conlon tried to cope with his diagnoses for 18 months without a service dog.

“For the whole 18 months, all I could think was, ‘There’s no way I can go and get another service dog,’ because it felt like it was betraying,” Conlon said.

After much deliberation, Conlon was connected in December with Nova, a female golden Lab and great Dane mix.

“When a service dog leaves its person, the effect can be devastating to the person, and often to the entire family in

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altering ways,” Lu Picard, ECAD co-founder and director of programs, said in a statement.

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As a nonprofit, ECAD relies totally on donations for its existence.

“Fundraising for your first service dog is hard, but having to fundraise for a second, when going one day without a service dog is unbearable, can seem impossible,” Carrie Picard, ECAD’s head of development and marketing, said in a statement.

It can cost upward of \$40,000 to train a service dog, Conlon said.

Nova helps wake Conlon up out of a nightmare or comforts him after a nightmare.

“When I would have a nightmare, they would be so vivid that when I’d wake up from them, I couldn’t go back to sleep,” said Conlon.

She will avoid aisles that contain too many people. She also responds to the “block” command, placing her body between Conlon and anyone too close.

“She is definitely closer to the PTSD aspect,” Conlon said, “as far as keeping me calm, collected. Out in public, I’m so fixated on her that I don’t worry about other people.”

Nova also serves as a great ice breaker in her hot pink service vest.

“I don’t like to talk to people really in public, but if I have to I can,” Conlon said. “If it’s an interaction that’s bound to happen, she’s the perfect segue into a conversation.”

Nova hasn’t replaced Dior in Conlon’s mind. He equates the transition to losing a battle buddy in combat.

“I lost Dior and I was on the fence for 18, 19 months, but when I met Nova, it wasn’t a replacement. It was new. It was like I made a new best friend,” Conlon said. “She’s not taking Dior’s place, she’s doing a job that Dior did. I honestly wish I had done it sooner.”