

*Something to Howl About*

*JANUARY 2025*

# ***PATRIOT PUPPY PRESS***



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## **A NOTE FROM THE CHAIR**

A Servant’s Heart – “The Why” -----Mike Kitchens, Volunteer Chair

People often ask me how much time I spend with my SMSD volunteer activities. When I tell them 25-30 hours a week, my response often leads to a second question: Why? Although there have been times when I have asked myself the same question, the answer always comes easy and I thought it might be worthwhile to share that answer.

SMSD and its mission of “Enhancing the Physical and Psychological Quality of Life for Wounded Veterans/First Responders” has provided me with a wonderful sense of purpose for the past fourteen years and continues to do so. Along with that sense of purpose comes a high level of pride and personal identity. Along the way I have developed an in-depth understanding and appreciation for the family sacrifices that are made by our clients during their service to our nation and communities.

Our canines – oh my, these wonderful creatures. Their loyalty, desire to serve, receptiveness to training and their different personalities are a pleasure to observe as they progress to their end goal of service to others. More than once have I had a wounded Veteran look me in the eye and say “I wouldn’t be here without my dog.”

To have the opportunity to work with so many wonderful volunteers and donors that provide SMSD with their time and resources is such a Godsend. Not only do they trust and believe in our organization, but all have what I refer to as a servant’s heart. A servant’s heart is characterized by humility, empathy, compassion, and stewardship along with a genuine desire to help others. The person with a servant’s heart prioritizes the needs of others over one’s own.

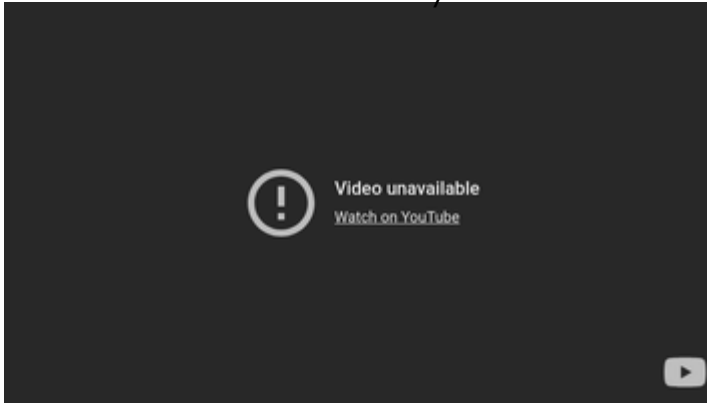
In closing, I am sure that if you ask yourself the question of “Why,” you will have many of the same answers. To be a blessing to others is a great way to pay it forward. There is nothing like a “paycheck for the heart.”

Wishing all a wonderful 2025 and thanks for taking this journey with all of us at SMSD.

*Mike*

# RECIPIENT NEWS

USAF Veteran David and SMSD Honor were celebrated at a Passing of the Leash ceremony December 20, 2024. If the link does not show on your device, please visit our YouTube page to watch the video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Umyu2R43M2k>



Diana with SMSD Valor

Back in time when the weather was warm and the grass was green - those were the days!

Dawnie with SMSD Hondo



Our favorite Veteran Farmer Charley Jordan speaking at the 2024 Night for Patriots



# KENNEL NEWS

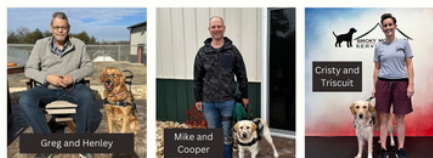
## MEET YOUR TRAINERS



Staff Trainers Melissa Marti and Laura Porter;  
Heather Wilkerson, Canine Program Manager;  
Susan Randall, Lead Trainer

Our excellent training staff worked dilligently all year to keep our dogs on the right track to be able to graduate our program and start their life of service in 2024.

We look forward to another successful year in 2025!



Congratulations to our 2024 recipients!



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Thanks to Heather's careful planning and foresight, all staff, volunteers and canines were kept safe through the recent winter storms. The road leading to our facility can become treacherous in winter conditions so be sure to verify if the kennel is open during icy/snowy weather.

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The Tellico Village Quilters presented Facility Manager Darrell Wilkerson with a Quilt of Valor to honor and recognize his service to our nation. Darrell was in the Navy from 1992 - 1996 during the Persian Gulf War. He has received the National Service Defense Medal, the Southwest Asia Service Medal and the Kuwait Liberation Medal.

He continues to support veterans through his work with Smoky Mountain Service Dogs. We thank you and appreciate all you do for us and your country.

# NEWS FROM YOUR VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR TEAM

## [SPOTLIGHT ON Gary Kaplan, SMSD Volunteer Puppy Raiser](#)

SMSD has many distinguished veterans serving in a variety of volunteer roles. In this article you will learn about a very special veteran, Retired Private First Class Gary P. Kaplan, US Marine Corps.

Gary continues his dedication to service for our country in a significant way as a 4 time puppy raiser with SMSD. In addition, he serves in the East Tennessee Honor Guard Society. The Military Funeral Honors Program provides military honors for eligible veterans and active-duty members. A uniformed detail of a least 2 Marines folds and presents the American flag to the next of kin.

**To read more about Gary, please read this article**

**<https://norwalkctheroes.org/2021/11/17/private-first-class-gary-p-kaplan-u-s-marine-corps/>**

### **A Note of Thanks to Gary from Laura Porter, Staff Trainer**

Gary has raised 4 puppies for SMSD - Silas, Bailey, Larry, and now Checkers. His eagerness to learn new skills with each puppy and his devotion to each dog is incredible. Gary continues to serve the community as an active participant in the East Tennessee Honor Guard Society. He always brings a laugh and a smile to puppy class. His joy and commitment for the mission of SMSD is unwavering and we appreciate everything that he has done for this program as well as his military service.

### **A Note of Thanks to Gary from Deb Sciarretta, SMSD Puppy Raiser Coordinator and past Board Member**

We like to refer to Gary as the Puppy Whisperer. He is currently raising his 4th puppy for us and has been our house breaking specialist. We thank Gary for his amazing military service and for his commitment to SMSD and our Mission.



### **Welcome 4Q 2024 SMSD Volunteers!**

Bill Bartheley Transporter  
Anne Cloud Transporter  
Evelyn & John Elshaw Puppy Raisers  
Pat Mullen Transporter  
Brynn Nelson Transporter  
Marcia Parrill Transporter  
Tory Wiegman Transporter

## Please welcome our newest board member, Commander Jim Bolon, US Navy (Retired)

Jim currently resides in the Fox Run subdivision in Farragut, TN with his wife Nancy. Jim, a retired Naval Officer, has been very active supporting SMSD as president of Isotek Systems, a sustaining partner of Smoky Mountain Service Dogs since 2015. A graduate of Penn State University with a Master's Degree in Nuclear Engineering and also a graduate of the University of Tennessee with a master's degree in Business Administration, Jim brings an array of business acumen to SMSD. Currently serving as the President of the Fox Run Homeowners Association, his volunteer spirit and devotion to community service is unmatched. Jim retired from Isotek this past February and is ready to devote his time and commitment as a "Forever Friend" of SMSD. Jim and Nancy both served as respite volunteers.

## 2025 SMSD Board of Directors



Back Row L-R: Tom Bradley, Brian Goad, Chair Mike Kitchens, Secretary John Fearn, John Nametz, Treasurer Adri Blignaut, Jim Bolon, Vice-Chair Steve Bartolone  
Front Row L-R: Laurie Birt, Suzy Kitchens, Carla Navas

## WHAT'S IN A NAME???

### SMSDiT Silas

Silas was named by longtime friends Don and Valerie Whaley, owners of Natural Pet Supply. They named him in honor of their friend "Uncle Si" (Si Robertson) of Duck Dynasty fame. And, yes, Silas has had a chance to meet Uncle Si in Knoxville.



The Specialty License Plate project continues to do well. This would be a good time to order your plate and show your support for SMSD. You can go to your county clerk's office at any time in your renewal cycle and they will prorate the fee.



[HTTP://SMOKYMOUNTAIN SERVICEDOGS.ORG/](http://smokymountain servicedogs.org/)

Send comments, suggestions and critiques to [Laurie.B@smokymountain servicedogs.org](mailto:Laurie.B@smokymountain servicedogs.org)