The Importance of Teamwork
By: Handler Keith Erickson

Why is it so important for the men on the PVSP New Life K9’s team to work together for the greater good of reaching a common goal? Because we have all signed up for the same mission, and it is simple; without each other we are only destined to fail. We are destined to fail the dogs, and just as importantly, we are destined to fail ourselves.

In life, inside or outside of prison, we must often see past our own personalities and attitudes when they get in the way of what really matters, which in this case is to reach the finish line together instead of having left anyone behind, both dogs and handlers alike. So, what do you do when destiny is staring you in the face and telling you that you are not going to make it unless you all come together? Well, you do what you must do: You rebuild your team from the bottom up.

PVSP’s New Life K9’s program started last year with a group of twenty men who were eager to work with the dogs, and yet they were not willing to work together the way we should have been. Today, we are not that same team from any angle that you look at us. We have grown from just individuals into what the dogs truly needed, which is a real team. It was not easy, but, we all had something that this team needed collectively, and that was past experience.

(Continued on Page 4)
We would first like to take this moment to extend our thoughts, prayers and deepest sympathies to those who have lost someone directly as a result of the COVID-19 devastation that has swept our communities worldwide. We are with you all in heart and soul and the fight is something that we all must continue to do together rather than apart if we are going to come out of this stronger than we ever have been before.

In this Double Edition of our Newsletter, we wanted to make the primary focus the team of handlers that have come so far in the past year here at Pleasant Valley State Prison. However, this is not to say that we are limiting our coverage of the beautiful dogs that are in our care, because that would be very hard to do considering we love them so much! The truth is, we believe that we have come a long way with this team, or should I say family, and we would like to share with you just how we were able to get to the place we are now. Every day we are reminded of how far we have come when we look around the room during our teaching sessions, or when we get together every weekend to have a group banquet with all of us breaking bread as a family unit.

We would also like to thank our brothers at CMC and CTF institutions for recognizing our team here at PVSP, and most importantly, for extending their love and support. We are all on a collective mission to help save lives through the healing power of the human-canine bond, and yet, these dogs are saving each one of our lives in the process; together we are becoming who it is that we were always meant to become, and that in itself is something that we will always have together, which is our journey.

To The Retriever team at CTF-North: We were very impressed with your Spring 2020 Magazine, A New Perspective on Life, and personal heartfelt stories of your team handlers; they were inspiring and touching to say the very least. From the outside looking in many people never truly understand the process of healing that takes place within our programs, and it is up to each of us to be that voice out into the community. So, thank you for carrying the torch and making us all that much stronger!

And remember to: “Love your dog today as if tomorrow is not promised.”

- The Four Paws Bulletin Team-PVSP
From Strangers to Teammates
By: Handler Ernesto Sanchez

When I was first asked to write about the team here at PVSP and about what my thoughts were on “teamwork”, I knew what I wanted to say. I have had a dream of running my own youth basketball program when I am released for quite some time now. So, this was going to be easy and straight from the heart.

The term “team” comes with many elements that are going to take the heart & soul of each and every person that is involved within your group. You were not placed together to simply exist as individual beings. You were brought together in great hopes that you would trust in eachother, more so than you have been able to trust in yourselves, and work together as a functioning unit in time.

I believe that the most important thing that you can do is to create an environment that is going to be emotionally safe. In other words, it is critical that you set a tone from the very start where “whatever your group reveals about eachother, individually or collectively, must remain within your circle”. This (trust) will be the seed of what is to come. And, if you allow this to wither away, from the very start it’s going to be next to nearly impossible to bounce back from and cultivate it where it must in order to grow.

I realize that it feels awkward to throw the words “trust, love, and appreciation” around while here in Prison because so many of us have been deceived by others who have taken advantage of us when allowing ourselves to be emotionally vulnerable. However, if you are at this point in your recovery where you are expected to take a risk in order to move forward, then you are going to have to remove the mask and show the world around you who it is that you were meant to be. You do this by stepping out of your comfort zone.

There will be moments of uncertainty. There will be moments of conflict. And, there will be moments that feel much like a crisis. But, the beauty of all this is that there will be an undeniable growth as a result of your refusal to give up on eachother based on your common goal of succeeding. Trust me; you will reach a point where you will refuse to give up on eachother. In the meantime, encourage eachother to learn from your mistakes along the way.

When I think about our own team here at PVSP, I cannot help but cringe at the moments where we all felt a surge of panic and defeat. We struggled like any other new imbalance of personalities and backgrounds in a group, and yet, we all wanted so badly to succeed that we were willing to go all the way in. We were able to let go of the ego trips that some of us have had for a very long time, and what we began to notice right away is that we were stronger with eachother than we were without eachother.

We have now reached a growth in our own group where much of the time it feels like it has taken on a life of its own. To begin with, our dog handlers have begun to step up without being asked to in our teaching sessions, risen to the challenge of thinking outside the box when we are faced with an obstacle, and more importantly, they are always ready to lean on eachother for support (inside or outside of what takes place in the dog program). That in itself is a testament as to how far a group of men can go when they are willing to grow and empower one another, instead of shutting down emotionally like many of us were accustomed to doing in the past.

So, I guess you may not have noticed, but I have yet to use the term “team” when referring to our group of men here at PVSP. I wanted you to get a clear understanding of what it is that is first needed in order for a group of men to be considered a “Team”. Today, I am proud to say that this is more than just a group or a team, we are a family. We have learned a great deal from eachother over the course of this past year, and we are not afraid to hold one another accountable for the greater good of our team’s success in the long run. We are also not afraid to be vulnerable with eachother in those moments where we know that we are simply just imperfect creatures who sometimes need to be helped along the way of this amazing journey that we are on together.

“Real Teamwork is built from the ground up....not from the top down!”
When I say past experience, I am referring to not just the amount of “time” that each of us has spent incarcerated. I am talking about the wisdom and insight that has been acquired by attending many self-help groups while here in prison. As a team we knew that something must be done if we were going to reach that level where we feel as confident inside as we were portraying in our weekly meetings, or the articles that we were printing in our newsletter every month. It felt fraudulent when we would talk about teamwork and being a family, yet when it came to our actions towards one another, we were falling short. So, what did we do? We took action.

The best remedy for this is simple; put into action the tools that we have acquired from the other groups under our belts like: Getting Out By Going In, Alternatives to Violence, Anger Management, Criminals and Gangs Anonymous, and so many others that would become useful in bridging the communication gap that existed. We began bi-weekly workshops referred to as Teambuilding Workshops, and introduced them to the men in the group. Everyone was receptive to the idea of using other groups to make this one that much stronger, and that alone was the start of something good for this team. We had handlers that were courteous and helpful towards each other when needed to be, and up until that point we had guys that had not even attempted to get to know a lot of the guys on the team.

A Concentric Circle, which is a layout page taken straight from the Alternatives to Violence manual, is designed to get the guys paired up and talking about various topics that would be considered intimate and personal, such as “What do you believe is essential in creating a solid community amongst its residence”? The fact that we are incarcerated has nothing to do with the fact that we are still considered a community. However, I think that most of the men in here have been so detached from their own communities for so long, that they feel they are limiting themselves to what it is they can contribute to all that is around them. More importantly, how each one of their attitudes alone can change the dynamics about what is around them altogether.

We have had great success at utilizing these alternative groups to rebuild and restructure the New Life K9’s team here at Pleasant Valley State Prison, and the men have risen to the challenge in every way imaginable to get past their own ideologies as to what is right and what is wrong; when it comes to the New Life K9’s team here at PVSP, what may be right for one individual is no longer right for the entire team that is on this journey together, and we are always conscientious of that now.

Everyday 22 veterans and First Responders commit suicide after losing their struggles with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Please help me and my friends save each and every one of them before they give up on their precious lives.

Join 22 For Life At: NewLifeK9's.Org
They Call Him Rowan
By: Handler Louie Carrillo

It was definitely love at first sight! With his inviting personality, I instantly knew that Rowan was the one who I would choose to take this journey with, while molding him into becoming the best service dog that he could possibly be. All the other dogs are great, however, Rowan has always been the best one for me based on our similar personalities. He is just as laid back as I am and takes in the world around him a little bit at a time. As he sat in my lap that first time and licked my face with his puppy breathe, I forgot that I was actually sitting here in prison.

If you were to ask me what types of emotions Rowan brings me, I would say that he brings me a lot of peace, love, serenity, and pureness that nothing else has brought me since my childhood. While in prison I have battled with a lot of mental and emotional difficulties throughout the years, and yet, when Rowan came into my life all of that changed because it was so much better than being on any medication or assigned to a Clinician. In so many ways he became my rock and cornerstone in a life that has been lost as sea for quite some time now.

They say that Rowan was their “gut pick”, the New Life K9’s Organization; because he showed very few transparent signs that he would be able to fill the shoes of a potential service dog. They went out on a limb when they selected him from his litter mates, and yet it ended up being one of their better picks because he can do just about anything after a few one on one lessons with a handler. He is a very mature dog and confident in a quiet yet determined way. Watching him learn new things has been an awesome experience every step of the way so far.

I believe that the bond I share with Rowan is something that is genuine, in the sense that it has developed throughout all of the stages that I had never been able to nurture in my own personal life. Sometimes it takes a lot of patience and compromise to build a bond with another being and that is something I had failed to pay better attention to in my past. Today, it is so much different because it is as if Rowan is the one that has taught me how to uphold my end in the relationship (bond) that I had previously just taken for granted with others.

I promised Rowan the first day that I was assigned to him, “I will never let you down Little Buddy”, and I meant it. Whatever the future holds for us both I know that he will be a great addition to the world, that is for sure.
In February I went to Committee and was told that I was going to have to transfer due to my custody level dropping to a level one. Unfortunately, that means my time here at PVSP will soon come to an end. On the upside, I will be going to CTF-South and into the New Life K9’s program they have there. Of course the down-side is that I will not be here to see my handsome boy Nelson graduate, and I will have to leave him sooner than I thought. I was more prepared for him to eventually be leaving me one day, not the other way around. This has caused much trepidation and sadness within my heart and is quite heavy in my thoughts, but, then something else hits me….I am not only leaving Nelson, but also I am leaving the team of handlers I have come to know and respect…...and yes….like!

Okay, I know at this point someone is bringing up the “Grumpy Old Man” stigma that I rightfully earned amongst the team, but if you could see the actual transformation happening inside me (which is a mess) then maybe you would see me in a different light. I was hoping to be here long enough for that to happen. So, now with this COVID 19 thing going on, well who knows when I am leaving? I feel a bit guilty because I know people are hurting out there, but I sure am grateful for this extended time with Nelson and my team; they have become much like my dysfunctional family at times. This year has whizzed by and I am proud to have been a part of the team since the very beginning. I have learned so much from Nelson, all of our dogs really, the program itself, and from each one of you. I know that Nelson will be in good hands with all of you. I know the program at PVSP will flourish because it is in good hands. You are my brothers and I wish each and every one of you the very best. Ω

Today, May 25, 2020, I woke up here in my prison cell and felt heaviness in my heart that I had not felt since last year at this very time and date. It was a day of remembrance for those who have served our country and those whom paid the ultimate price with their very lives. I am A U.S. Navy Veteran 1996-2014, Petty Officer First Class, and my name is John Demery of the New Life K9 Handler team here at Pleasant Valley State Prison.

I want to share with you a true story based on gaining true perspective of my own life while out on deployment. We had just been brought back from the Middle East and were on the tar mat of our plane awaiting exit from a long trip back home. We were all pretty exhausted and anxious to see our families after being away from them for so long. The guys with me, myself included, were moaning and groaning about why it was taking so long for them to let us off when a white unmarked plane began to roll into our sight. Everyone down on ground level stopped in their tracks and just stared at the plane as it moved across the tar mat. It felt ceremonial and rehearsed.

As I sat there staring out of the planes window I could see the back end beginning to open up. In its cargo department, there were coffins assembled into formation draped with American flags atop of them. I felt this sudden surge of darkness fall over me as I sat there with my heart beating fast in my chest. I had been in such a rush to get back home and into the arms of my wife and daughters, that I failed to remember the fact that some of my brothers and sisters were never coming home. There they rested, having paid the ultimate price, in each one of those boarded coffins lined up next to each other, lifeless.

So you see, sometimes we get so caught up in our own lives that we forget to see the things that matter the most. I served my country with all that I had as a man and a soldier, and yet, it was not enough to save every precious life that deserved to be right there with me on that plane that day. I sat there in silence, just like the rest of the men and women on the plane with me, and my life changed instantly. I was able to see the world around me in a different light than I had before, and today I still remember that day as if it were yesterday. I told myself I would never live my life in vain by forgetting the precious moments that come and go from that day forward. And, I still look back on that day sitting up there in the plane peering out the window as my day to remember what life is really all about. ☝

**My Forever Family**

By: Handler Chad Thomas

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**A Day for Me To Remember**

By: Handler John Demery

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**PETTY OFFICER FIRST CLASS, JOHN DEMERY, U.S. NAVY VETERAN 1996-2014**
TEAM BUILDING CROSSWORD

BY: Handler Chad Thomas

Across
1. Resistance only ______resistance
4. Lady Lab on PVSP Team
5. Kate’s stare at times
6. Level
9. Yes in Espanol
10. There’s no “I” in it
11. John’s boy

Down
1. Need it to build
2. Transform
3. Team building function
7. Point of___________
8. A feeling

ANSWERS-Across-1-Creates-4-Nala-5-Even-9-Si-10-Team-11-Koa
Down-1-Change-2-Evolve-3-Exercise-7-View-8-Numb
New Life K9’s is proud to announce their teaming up with Top Dog Coffee Company with many locations here in and around the Central Coast of California. To learn more about how you can help visit: www.topdogcoffeebar.com or rescue-me-coffee.com

“Please help make a difference in our communities...our precious canines need us more now than ever.”

Four Paws Team, PVSP
Keith Erickson-Editor in Chief
Derek Romero-Editor
John Demery-Editor
Ernie Serrano-Chief Interview
Ernesto Sanchez-Interview executive

Contributing Writer’s
Keith Erickson
John Demery
Ernesto Sanchez
Louie Carrillo
Chad Thomas

Even extraordinary well-trained dogs aren’t safe in open areas unless they are on a leash. But, by their very nature, leashes take away any sense of control or freedom. We designed the We Leash to give back that sense of freedom. The section of the leash that your dog holds is slightly longer than the section that goes to his/her collar or harness, making it unlikely they will feel any pressure. It’s as close to walking without a leash as is possible while still maintaining maximum security.

Envision puppies growing up never having to feel pressure on their collars or harnesses...never knowing the fear that comes with restraint. Imagine the relief of an adult dog who suddenly realizes the restraint is gone. No more feelings of vulnerability that lead to reactivity. No more bolting after small fuzzy creatures as the hunt is over-success is evidenced by the prize held securely in the dog’s mouth in the form of a We Toy. No more pulling as there is nothing to pull against.

All dogs, no matter their age, breed, or size, deserve the feeling and freedom that the We Leash can give them. That’s why we at New Life K9’s use the We Leash for all of our dogs. You should too!

To learn more about the We Leash, visit: https://wefordogs.com

Special Thanks:
S. Frauenheim, Warden-Pleasant Valley Prison...
D. Nelson-D, Captain-D-Facility.........
Our dedicated Puppy Raisers..........  
New Life K9’s Organization & Family........
PVSP Administration as a whole........
PVSP Population (For embracing the dogs)......

Special Recognition:
For your day-to-day efforts in making NLK9 here at PVSP what it has become in our first year of existence:
Lieutenant, D. Stiles, D-Facility/ NLK9 Liaison......
Building Four, Floor Officers/2&3 Watch....
D-Facility Yard Officers/2&3 Watch......
D-Gym Officer, Salazar for all your help......
Teams at CMC & CTF North & South for embracing us into your families....