

Greg Burt has experiences from his eight years of military service that most of us could never imagine. Like many men and women who serve in the United States Military, Greg encountered untold catastrophic events and didn't return home unscathed. When he returned to civilian life in Tennessee, Greg became a fire fighter and emergency medical technician for the City of Murfreesboro's Fire and Rescue Department. He wanted to serve others in a new way.

Greg was accustomed to action-filled days full of adrenaline that created a ceaseless state of being "on guard." After living in a state of constant stress and high alert in the military, Greg found that the downtime in his work with Fire and Rescue was a breeding ground for anxiety. All of his thoughts and feelings had time to replay themselves and Greg would often tailspin into unbearable panic attacks. Without the constant distractions like before, those feelings took control of Greg and threatened his quality of life at work and home, in his relationships, and within himself. Greg recalls that he did not recognize what was happening at first. It was after a terrifying night terror that drove Greg into a fight or flight mode that his partner at the time gave him an ultimatum to seek help. "I was tired of being always on guard. It was embarrassing and uncomfortable, but I knew change had to happen," Greg says of his decision to seek help. With support from the Veteran's Administration, he learned that he was experiencing the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). "At first, I felt raw and exposed. It took a long time to speak candidly and to acknowledge the PTSD," Greg says. After recognizing his symptoms and seeking treatment he sought a form of therapy that is gaining recognition as a way to help people manage the effects of PTSD. He wanted to see if man's best friend could help.

As anyone who owns a dog can attest, they can dramatically improve outlooks and attitudes by elevating mood, reducing stress, and providing companionship. For those with PTSD, dogs can provide more than emotional support and comfort. Their services can range from redirecting their owner when they sense the onset of PTSD symptoms or scanning buildings and entryways ahead of their owner, alerting that all is safe ahead. In fact, these are two major tasks that Greg's service dog, a Cane Corso named Gauge, performs for him regularly. Greg and Gauge had been together for only one week when Greg's mother passed away. This unforeseen traumatic event helped bond the pair early on. Gauge sat loyally by Greg's side and proved to Greg that using a service dog was going to help. Shortly after, Greg was ready to acclimate Gauge to his everyday life, including the long shifts in the firehouse.

When Greg approached the City of Murfreesboro about bringing his service dog to work, his request was the first of its kind. To ensure that this initial request was handled appropriately, Greg reached out to Disability Rights TN for help. Both the City and Greg acknowledged the desire to navigate the process appropriately and, in doing so, set a

precedent for handling service animal reasonable accommodations in the workplace. At first the City was requiring Greg to enter into a written agreement that classified Gauge as an emotional support animal, which would limit Greg's privileges with Gauge while on the job. While there are many dogs who assist by providing emotional support, they are not legally considered service animals and do not receive the broader protection service animals are afforded under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Service animals, unlike emotional support animals, provide one or more services to their owner's such as scanning a room before entry in Greg's case. Greg knew that Gauge did much more for him than provide emotional support and comfort and therefore was covered to receive the additional privileges.

DRT communicated to the City of Murfreesboro the legal distinction between emotional support and service animals and explained why Gauge is the latter. Additionally, Greg advocated for himself by explaining the need to have Gauge present when he is in the firehouse. The City was receptive to the information and reclassified Gauge as a service animal, allowing Gauge to assist Greg at work.

With the situation at work resolved, Greg was free to search for other avenues where he and Gauge could be of service to others. Together, they visit patients at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital, lifting spirits and bringing much-needed smiles. So, while Gauge is unquestionably Greg's service animal, his impact extends beyond Greg to bring emotional support to the children he visits. Greg hopes that as they grow together, he will continue to find opportunities for Gauge to improve lives other than his own.

Together for six months now, Gauge has made it easier and more comfortable for Greg to interact with strangers and provides him the familiarity of training and giving commands. Most importantly, he at last allows Greg to experience the work downtime and quiet hours without feeling the panic. Of his relationship with Gauge he says, "I feel peace. I'm no longer on alert 24/7. Gauge has given me security."