

## Hounds and Heroes matches dogs with veterans

BY HANNAH WINSTON PALM BEACH POST STAFF WRITER



Marine veteran Charles A. Nicastro IV of Boynton Beach walks with his dog, Buddy, at Palm Beach Kennel Club on Saturday. Hounds and Heroes trainer Carolee Ellison is at right. THOMAS CORDY / THE PALM BEACH POST

For Frank Policastri, having Buff means for the first time in 23 years he can walk without a cane. The 71-year-old Army veteran, who worked in medical centers from Germany to Denver, said Buff his service dog has given him a new life.

“He’s sharp and picks things up so quickly,” the West Palm Beach resident said of his dog. “He predicts my movements, and he’s a great companion.”

On Saturday afternoon at Palm Beach Kennel Club, four local veterans received trained greyhound service dogs through the program Hounds and Heroes. The organization, which works under Boynton Beach’s Awesome Greyhound Adoptions, provides “therapy dogs or fully-trained service dogs for veterans with PTSD or who need mobile assistance,” according to the group’s website.

Barbara Mesi, who runs the program, said the group has provided eight retired racers, including those at Saturday’s ceremony, since it began in 2011. It costs \$4,000 to pay for all medical bills and training for the dogs, according to the website. It takes six months to train the dogs, two of which are spent bonding with selected veterans.

“It’s just awesome,” she said. “It makes me tear up.”

For Robert Keefe, 31, who served in the Marine Corps in Afghanistan and Okinawa, Japan, Rocky gives him support. The Okeechobee native said he has had dogs in the past, but Rocky brings him comfort like no other.

“Dogs are always wanting attention, for you to love them,” he said. “The difference (with Rocky) is he’s the one loving on me.”

Palm Beach County State Attorney Dave Aronberg spoke about the importance of finding homes for dogs and taking care of the country’s veterans. He said programs like Hounds and Heroes show what great things can be done.

“They’re (dogs) not just adopted, but adopted by heroes, veterans,” he said. “It’s a win-win”  
Those wishing to make a donation or volunteer can do so at [awesomegreyhoundadoptions.org](https://www.awesomegreyhoundadoptions.org)