

Brave hearts

IN 2012 DR. TERRY MORRIS FOUNDED VETS TO VETS UNITED, INC. IN THE HOPES OF PAIRING RESCUE DOGS WITH VETERANS

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When Durham native Dr. Terry Morris, D.V.M., Ph.D. looked at her life in 2012 she realized it was not serving her because she was not serving others. Morris was at a crossroads in her career, coming off of a research position she prayed and asked God to place the right career in her path. "I happened to be watching television and there was a documentary on about rescue dogs helping veterans," said Morris. "I did the research on the number of veterans in North Carolina and I thought about the veteran's hospital right here in Durham and it all clicked." Morris tells the story of literally and figuratively putting her foot in the path that night as she began to dream of the idea for Vets to Vets United, Inc. "I went out for a run and started crying because I was so grateful," said Morris. "Dogs as service animals for veterans brought together my vision for serving animals and helping people." Morris created Vets to Vets United, Inc. for U.S. military veterans who are lonely, suffering from depression, or who have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury, or physical disability. The program helps pair those veterans with a rescue dog as a companion animal, classroom training to work toward certification, and discounted veterinary care. Last July Vets to Vets celebrated its first graduating class of ten teams and next March the organization will meet its five-year mark — milestones that have taken hard work and dedication. Currently Morris is working hard to transition her non-profit to the next step which means a need for more fundraising and hiring administrative help. It is clear she gets back the love she puts into her work; you can hear the joy in her voice as she describes the training process. "If you put a bunch of dogs in a room with people it's hard not to laugh," said Morris. "We have a good time!" After the classroom portion of the program the service dog and veteran teams must train in public for a public access test administered by an independent testing program in order to be certified as a therapy dog. Once they are certified the teams are encouraged to give back by visiting VA hospitals, Senior Centers, and returning to the program as mentors. Veteran Paul Shuping joined Vets to Vets in 2014 with his first dog Apollo, who has since died. Shuping is now partnered with Wego who he credits with getting him out of the house and into the world to engage with people. "I suffer from depression and tend to be a recluse," Shuping said. "With Wego in my life I have to take responsibility for my life and for his life — he gets me out and about." Shuping and Wego are moving into the role of mentors in the classroom as a registered team, "I see it as being an upper-classman,

while we are still learning too we are also learning to be effective class leaders."Dogs are our most loyal companions □ there's a reason for the saying "a man's best friend" □ they accompany us, they serve us and they love us unconditionally. A dog as a service companion for a veteran can be a lifeline to the world.