

This is a story of living with PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), Lucky Dog Kennel and a black lab named Aspen. The story begins in a dark and dangerous forest full of roaming monsters and bottomless pits for falling into. This is the place of PTSD. Debilitating and persistent, PTSD steals the life and spirit from a person's soul. Its tenacious grasp distorts the mind to heightened levels of terror, anxiety and pain. Physicians, medications and therapy do their best, but sometimes the PTSD wins. I had struggled diligently, but the battle had been long and difficult. I was losing my will, and hope was a smaller and smaller point of light. I was lost in the dark forest.

My doctors made a recommendation; a treatment option being developed by the Veteran's Administration was gaining ground in psychiatric care. The military was expanding research into PTSD treatment options by using services dogs to assist with the effects of PTSD that burdened many returning vets. It was working. Let's try it, my doctors suggested. My personal research and search began.

As with any new idea, useful information is scarce. Through a chance comment by a co-worker, I discovered Lucky Dog Kennel. I spoke with Linda for about a half hour or so. This was a remarkable event. Until this conversation, all my contacts with service dog trainers had been met with either skepticism or lack of interest. Linda listened, asked questions about my needs and then invited me to the kennel. Linda's sincerity and genuine interest in the idea of a service dog for PTSD were a breath of fresh air.

It was a Sunday when I met Linda at Luck Dog. It was frightening for me to reveal so much to a stranger, but I forged ahead. She introduced me to some of the dogs as she gave me a tour of the kennel and told me of her life with her beloved dogs. She was passionate about her work.

We reached the last room in the building that contained a few kennels; there was no where left to go, I thought. My little bit of hope was beginning to waver. From where I stood, I couldn't see the dog inside the kennel that Linda had approached. As she opened the kennel door, a black lab happily greeted her. I was holding my breath, frozen in place. The dog emerged, turned her head and looked at me. I remember Linda introducing this black dog, but after those few words, the sounds of her voice faded as I reached my hand toward Aspen. Suddenly, with a knowing that I cannot describe, I knew this black dog could see into my heart and soul. She was here to help. I was frightened more than I can describe at the possibility of finding help so very close and simultaneously terrified it would be taken away. This is PTSD thinking: an overwhelming fear reaches up from the depths of your mind and hijacks all rational thought. Much of the rest of that meeting is a blur, I filled out paperwork, gave references, my anxiety causing me to write down mismatched phone numbers and people. Later in the week Linda was gracious as she called me back a few times for clarification.

I began to emerge from the dark forest a week later as Aspen and I left Detroit Lakes to journey back to Fergus Falls. It was December, a time of new beginnings and hope. We bonded quickly. Linda's skillful training served Aspen well. Aspen's calm demeanor, her comprehensive set of skills and abilities, and self confidence makes Aspen an ideal psychiatric service dog. Aspen and Linda are explorers in bringing relief to a landscape of suffering.

Aspen awakens me from my night terrors, her big paw thumping on me until I awaken. When a flashback explodes into my conscious thought, Aspen takes charge, covering my body with hers and keeping me safe while she calls me back from those terrible places in my mind. In public places and anxiety creeps in, Aspen finds the door for my escape. She moves between me and anyone who is invading my personal space. She is ever watchful and never stops 'checking on me'. Aspen goes to work with me every day. She manages my PTSD symptoms as I cannot.

My story is now our story. Aspen slays the monsters so I can 'stay calm and carry on' as the Queen of England says. Though PTSD cannot be cured, Aspen led me back into life.

Thank you Linda, for your gifts, Aspen's incredible training, listening to my words and your insight into bringing Aspen and I together. As in the old fairy tales, I found that it is possible emerge from the dark and dangerous forest to find the treasure. My treasure is Aspen.