

Therapy dog gives comfort after Orlando shooting

July 11, 2016



Ron Graff and Journey pose with other members of the Disaster Stress Relief program in Orlando

In the early hours of June 12 in Orlando, Florida, a gunman walked into the Pulse nightclub and opened fire, killing 49 people and injuring dozens of others.

Eighty-five miles away in Tampa, Ronald Graff, assistant vice president, Product Development & Strategic Planning, was at home when he received a call from Therapy Dogs International asking him to join a six-person team of handlers and therapy dogs and go to Orlando.

“I’m a volunteer with the organization and its Disaster Stress Relief (DSR) program. We take our dogs and go in to communities after a disaster or tragic situation to provide therapeutic and emotional support for families, victims, first responders and the community at large.”

A few hours after the shooting, Graff and his golden retriever Journey were on the road, making the nearly 90-minute drive to Orlando.

They arrived early Monday morning, the day most family members found out their loved ones had died inside the club. Their first stop: the family assistance center.

“It was a very emotional environment, a very somber environment. There were teams of

mental health professionals there. Lots of police, investigators, chaplains from just about every local police station, chaplains from the FBI, a whole team of victims assistance advocates from the FBI and from local police agencies.”



Graff and Journey spent most of the day providing support to family and friends of the deceased.

“As we walked through the room, there was a woman sitting in a chair. Journey went up to her and put his head on her lap. She spent about five minutes petting and talking to him. Then she got up, thanked me and told me that my dog had helped her because she had just learned that her son had died.”

The DSR team also visited the 911 center. Part of the therapy dogs’ job is to give first responders and other workers an outlet to de-stress.

“One of the 911 supervisors was sitting on the floor petting Journey and rubbing his belly. She told me it was the first time she got to de-stress because she was actually on duty the night of the shooting.”

Graff and Journey stayed a week in Orlando. As they made their way back and forth between the family assistance center and the 911 center, Journey provided affection and support to those in need.

Journey is a special dog. Born without a left front paw, the 7-year-old gets around with the help of a prosthetic.

With his calm, gentle temperament and uniqueness, Journey always attracts attention.

“It’s amazing when we walk up to people. You see their face brighten. They’ll stop and start petting and talking to Journey particularly because he wears a prosthetic paw. People start talking to me about Journey for two, five, 10 minutes. However long it might be. Just an opportunity for a person in a stressful situation to put all of that in the background and simply focus on the dog, and that’s what a DSR dog is supposed to do. That’s the help and therapy

they provide.”

Graff and his pets have been doing therapy work since 2008. He started with his first golden retriever Jason who passed away two years ago.

Now, he has Journey and 18-month-old Jackson (another golden retriever pictured to the left). They go with him to St. Joseph’s Hospital in Tampa two nights a week to visit patients and staff as part of the hospital’s pet therapy program.



“Doing this work is a great opportunity to share my dogs. They’re great animals and they provide a wonderful service. I’m just happy I can be there to let them do the real work.”

Graff adds, “It gives me a tremendous amount of gratitude and pleasure knowing I can give back in a meaningful way and perhaps make a difference in the lives of others.”