

When Helyn Met Astro

An Afghanistan War veteran and VFW member in Virginia was both saved by her service dog and inspired to devote her new lease on life to fellow veterans

Dec 01, 2022

Standing on the precipice of a life suffocated by an abusive marriage and post-traumatic stress, Helyn Stowe had a tennis ball dropped on her lap — once, twice, and three time's a charm.

With the weight of a loaded gun in her hand and body clinging to the couch of her New York home, Stowe kept receiving the unsolicited tennis ball from her service dog, Astro. A chocolate Labrador with googly eyes, Astro's perseverance that morning in 2015 snapped Stowe out of the throes of suicide. But it also sparked a need for a fresh start.

"He's been my battle-bud since day one," said Stowe, who served 17 years in the Army and deployed twice to Afghanistan with the 10th Mountain Division out of Fort Drum, New York. "I wanted to check out, and Astro sort of became my lifeline."

The retired Army veteran, who was still recovering from combat-related injuries suffered during her second tour in Afghanistan in 2011, decided to pack all of Astro's belongings first, then her own, before storming out of New York in her Jeep.

Despite no destination mapped, Stowe had nowhere to go. But she had to get there fast. Moving her way south over several weeks, Stowe and Astro landed in Staunton, Virginia, 157 miles southwest of Washington, D.C., where she felt drawn to the place. Stowe and Astro spent the first week living out of the Jeep, then she moved into a hotel room.

"Astro had given me a new lease on life," said Stowe, a Life member of VFW Post 7814 in Staunton. "Looking back now, I'm very proud of myself. If anybody is out there and thinks they can't do it, oh God, yes they can."

'THEY'RE AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR LIVES'

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A military brat growing up, Stowe's path toward the Army started right out of high school in the late 1980s, making her the first woman in her family to do so. She would eventually deploy twice to Afghanistan in 2006 and 2011, the latter leaving life-long complications.

About a year into her second tour in Afghanistan, Stowe and her unit suffered an ambush attack by a suicide bomber. Medevacked out of Afghanistan, Stowe would spend the next nine months recovering at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, before being transferred to a hospital at Fort Drum for an additional three months.

"It was one of the hardest things," said Stowe, who has learned to cope with a traumatic brain injury (TBI) and vertigo as a result of the explosion. "I had to learn how to speak and walk all over again. It was very challenging for me."

Though the attack and wounds suffered had cut her military career short, Stowe was requested by the Army to travel down to Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, before her retirement, where she was to train alongside a service dog provided by K9s For Warriors, a charity veterans organization that pairs service dogs with veterans.

It was there that Stowe met her best friend, Astro, in 2013.

"They had put me on orders to go get him," Stowe said. "K9s For Warriors has a great system for pairing you with a dog based on your specific injuries. We just bonded so quickly."

A walking, prancing silver lining of the chocolate kind, Astro has on many occasions guided Stowe through vertigo spells, as well as uplifted her through post-traumatic stressors and stood by her on all of her daily tasks.

"I've done several events with service dogs, and it has always been a game-changer from the moment these veterans get their dog," Stowe said. "We're able to do things we wouldn't be able to do alone, like socializing and going out for a walk. They're an important part of our lives."

'I WANTED TO START SOMETHING LOCAL'

Often taking a backseat to admire her "battle-buddy" or "dude," Stowe credits Astro for helping her find her place in Staunton, where in 2019 she made it official by buying a home.

But Stowe's new lease on life also came with an unwritten clause to continue serving her adopted veterans' community by helping others like her deal with service-related trauma and depression.

Shortly after arriving and rooting herself in Staunton, Stowe pioneered the Queen City

Rucking for 22, a nonprofit that hosts charity events spawned out of her Army background and love for walking with a weighted rucksack/backpack.

“We did a lot of rucking in the Army,” said Stowe, who has participated in rucking events across northern Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina alongside Astro, always. “After the military, I got into Spartan races and other similar events to challenge myself and stay healthy. But I wanted to start something local since they had marathons and Spartan races but no rucking events here in town.”

Despite the uncertainty and chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Stowe received ample amounts of help from local businesses and her beloved Post 7814 members to host her first rucking event that August. To Stowe’s surprise, the inaugural event welcomed 93 participants, and it has only grown since.

“Having 93 participants in the middle of the pandemic was truly unexpected,” said Stowe, who is an active participant in VFW’s #StillServing campaign. “Now we have between 50-100 people twice a year. We still host the big event in August, but we’ve also been hosting a smaller one during the Christmas season to help raise funds for first responders and for collecting canned foods for those in need.”

Always held in Staunton, Stowe creates two courses, a 5-miler and a 22-kilometer course that she often changes to create variety for returning participants from the ages of 12 to 100. With a few events already under her scope in just three years, Stowe also has been able to help raise more than \$15,000 for local organizations and nonprofits that help veterans with PTSD and other service-related issues. Among those is Boulder Crest Foundation, a retreat center for veterans, first responders and their families in Bluemont, Virginia.

“I would really like to continue to grow the events by reaching out to other first responder and veterans’ organizations,” Stowe said. “I’m not just doing it for myself, but I’m doing this for others, especially veterans who are struggling. We’re all brothers and sisters.”

‘LIKE FAMILY’

A woman of her word, Stowe does more than run Queen City Rucking for 22. A devotee to her adopted veterans’ community, she is a fixture at Post 7814, where she helps as much as she can.

For Stowe, returning the love to members of Post 7814 comes naturally.

“They’re fantastic,” Stowe said of her fellow members. “They always help during my Queens City Rucking events, but they do more than that. They have been there for me over the years as my vertigo sets in often.”

From fish derby events for children and senior citizens to annual events that include drive-by Veterans Day parades, Memorial Day services and other local events to help raise funds for veterans and first responders, Stowe is usually at the ready if needed.

Despite her contributions to the local veterans' community in Staunton, Stowe added that Post 7814's members show that kind of familial caring and love to any veteran in need of it. "They make it a point to stop by my house to check in on me, and that's because we're all like family at the Post," Stowe said. "It is also comforting to know that if I need to call someone for help, they will always be there. There is just so much love going around at the Post. I am incredibly lucky to help these guys, as well as knowing that they have my back."

As for Astro, the chocolate Labrador is nearing 14 years old, but Stowe is not convinced he's ready for retirement just yet.

"I was going to have to retire Astro this year, and I was walking outside recently when I suffered a vertigo spell and somehow found myself at home," Stowe said. "I don't know what to make of it, but I imagine Astro was telling me he was not ready to retire just yet."

This article is featured in the 2022 November/December issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.