American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Transporting Smokey: A Puppy with a Purpose

3/13/2018

Since 1999, American Airlines team member volunteers have transported thousands of assistance dogs through the Puppies in Flight (PIF) program, a partnership with Assistance Dogs International. The program enlists volunteers to transport service dogs to trainers and then on to their permanent homes across the country and around the world. Recently, PIF helped Smokey, a 6-year-old yellow Labrador retriever service dog, fulfill his owner's dying wish.

Smokey was born at America's VetDogs in Smithtown, New York, and raised by inmates in the Guide Dog Foundation's prison puppy program. He was sponsored by a family in The Woodlands, Texas. In 2013, America's VetDogs paired Smokey with Victor Garcia, a Vietnam veteran in El Paso who also suffered from diabetes and was a double amputee.

Smokey provided support to Victor and was trained to fetch and retrieve things Victor may need - specific medication, his wallet or a phone, for example. They lived together for five years just blocks away from their close friend Tom Scrivner, who they met in 2014.

"I was driving by one day when I saw Victor was on his side - he had fallen out of his electric wheelchair," Tom told El Paso FOX-affiliate KFOX. "Smokey was standing by him and trying to help him up. I pulled over and helped them. He had hit an uneven part of the sidewalk. So I took him to his house and helped him get cleaned up. Ever since that day, we became the best of friends, and I'd go over every day to check on them."

Unfortunately, Victor passed away last month due to heart complications. He left behind two sons who don't live in El Paso but helped coordinate arrangements with Tom to take care of Smokey and fulfill Victor's final wish.

"Smokey's well-being was Victor's priority," Tom told KFOX. "He told me he would like for him to be retrained and given to another disabled vet so that Smokey could live out his days doing what he was born to do." Tom reached

out to the same organizations that raised, trained and paired Smokey with Victor, and the organizations came together to help him fulfill those wishes.

Travel arrangements were made between American and America's VetDogs. Through the PIF program, flight attendant Sharon Johnston and Global Communications senior specialist Justin Franco met Tom and Smokey at the El Paso airport (ELP) and accompanied Smokey on his journey back to New York.

"I've been involved with dozens of transports over the years, and this was by far one of the most emotional and impactful," said Justin. "Being a part of this particular transport will stay with me for a long time."

Smokey is now back at America's VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation and will be evaluated for future service. If all goes well, he will be retrained and paired with another vet soon.

See more of Smokey's story as covered by KFOX.

Victor and Smokey training together in 2013.

From top left: American Airlines' Justin Franco and Sharon Johnston with ELP Customer Service coordinator Joel Lugo. From bottom left: Tom Scrivner, Smokey and KFOX's Kandolite Flores.