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They Can Heel & Heal

Rape Victim Creates Therapy Dog Program To Help Others Who Have Been Assaulted

By [Joy Townsend](#)
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WINTER HAVEN

Dogs have always been a source of comfort for Andrea Lockhart. That was never more true than when Lockhart was raped at the age of 17.

Her dogs were also a source of strength that Lockhart mustered to go through the harrowing process of following through on a complaint she filed after the rape about six years ago.

"Law enforcement officers are scary when you're a victim," Lockhart said. "Police and other law enforcement just want evidence -- that's all."

Now 23, Lockhart recently had the idea that if her own dogs were such a comfort to her, why not other victims, too?

So, beginning with two service dogs, Lockhart this year established the non-profit victim advocacy program she named FLA Four Legged Advocates Inc.

"Especially kids, they're scared," said Lockhart who, since her own experience, has earned bachelor's and master's degrees in criminal justice from the University of Central Florida. The Ledger does not print the names of sexual assault victims without the victim's permission.

The dogs -- Abbey, a black Labrador retriever, and Squiggly, a golden retriever and Labrador mix -- are with her when Lockhart answers a referral from local law enforcement or victims' agency, makes a presentation to civic groups, and even during court proceedings.

The dogs are loving and therefore can engender trust in children that adults often can't, said Polk County Sheriff's Sgt. Lloyd Stewart. "It's an innovative program I think will benefit us and the victims," Stewart said. "It benefits us because it helps the victim through a process that can be daunting. It makes them a better witness."

The program's usefulness has been borne out through the two cases referred to Lockhart so far, Stewart said.

When one of the dogs is around, it doesn't take long to make the victim feel more at ease, Lockhart said.

"I'm there to explain to the victims why they're being asked these questions," she said. "The dog is there for that child or adult victim."

"Victims trust the dogs automatically," she said. "When they see Squiggly or Abbey, they almost trust me by default."



Andrea Lockhart, right, with Squiggly, and Andrea's mother, Kim Lockhart, with Abbey, started FLA Four Legged Advocates Inc. to help those who have been sexually assaulted. Below is Squiggly's service dog identification. Andrea Lockhart was raped at age 17 and said her own dogs provided much-needed comfort.

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Pam, a Zephyrhills mother of a sexual abuse victim, said it helped to have someone like Lockhart and Squiggly around throughout her daughter's experience with the legal system.

"My daughter made a connection with Andrea and she definitely loved Squiggly. The program is wonderful," she said. "She helped us know which steps to take throughout the law enforcement process.

"If she hadn't been there, I don't know what would have happened," Pam said.

Lockhart's work with Pam and her daughter led to the formation of Four Legged Advocates.

For about a year after finishing college, Lockhart worked as a sexual assault counselor for Sunrise of Pasco County Inc., a domestic violence center.

It was during her work there, that she came up with the idea of using dogs to help counsel victims of sexual assault and abuse.

She got Squiggly and Abbey from a Tampa-area guide dog school. The dogs had been trained as guide dogs for the blind, but they were deemed unusable for health reasons.

So the school donated Abbey and Squiggly to Lockhart.

Then late last year, she took a leap of faith and quit her job to dedicate herself full time to Four Legged Advocates.

"Sexual assault and domestic abuse is what's closest to my heart," Lockhart said. "My own experiences are what led me to this field."

Now, with the help of her mother, Kim Lockhart, Andrea Lockhart is trying to raise money and find grants to make the program available to more victims.

"Once you get support from agencies like the Sheriff's Office, your program is a success," Andrea Lockhart said. "All we need now is funding."

The Lockharts hope a letter of support received from Gov. Jeb Bush will help.

"The Florida Four Legged Advocates exemplifies this spirit of service and benevolence," Bush wrote. "The Four Legged Advocates provide crucial therapeutic assistance during times of crisis. Their mission to provide support to victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and other crimes makes a significant difference in the lives of those in unfortunate circumstances."

Coping with abuse in their lives is ongoing for many young victims. A lot of times the victim knows the attacker and is afraid of what might happen if she tells, Kim Lockhart said.

"At 8 and 9 years old, they have so much worldly knowledge, it's unbelievable," she said. "They know that other issues come out of abuse. They know that homeless and poverty happen when an abusive family member loses their job."

It's all about surviving, Andrea Lockhart said.

"Our priority is to make survivors out of victims," she said. "It's an added bonus when the perpetrator gets thrown in jail."

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