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Soldier helps the sick with her furry companion
Story by: Spc. Joshua Syberg, Indiana Army National Guard

INDIANAPOLIS – From birth, Rizzo Robbins was surrounded by her family and the love they provided. Being so young she only knew the beginning of life. The young girl never experienced the other side of this perpetual coin, the end of life.

Rizzo, named after a Chicago Cubs first baseman, began to notice an insatiable appetite to spread joy and love to others. At the time, she just didn't know how fulfill that desire.

Thanks to her best friend Chelsea, Rizzo learned to do more good than she could ever imagine.

After Chelsea snapped on the little puppy's vest over her soft fur and began walking into the hospice center, Rizzo knew she was exactly where she needed to be.

Staff Sgt. Chelsea Robbins, a battalion retention noncommissioned officer for the 2nd Battalion, 150th Field Artillery, 81st Troop Command, in Bloomington, Indiana and Rizzo's owner, possessed that same insatiable appetite to help those in need.

Especially during the coronavirus pandemic, those in hospice care faced the unfortunate side effect of getting distanced from family or friends.

However, puppies were there to help.

"Puppies can be very therapeutic for yourself or other people," Robbins said. "I love to spread the joy of what I get to experience every day. Rizzo is super sweet, so if she can love on somebody or licks somebody's face then they should be able to experience that."

Traditionally, hospice care centers assist terminally ill patients, regardless of age or circumstance, with comfort at the end of their lives.

The CDC estimated that in 2015 approximately 1.4 million patients inhabited hospice care in the United States. That number only grew as the years progressed.

Jennifer Price, director of admissions at Life's Journey Hospice in Avon, Indiana, and Rizzo's breeder, felt the firsthand the effects of COVID-19 in her work. She wanted to spread cheer and smiles to her residents who weren't able to receive visits under current social distancing guidelines, so she collaborated with Robbins to bring in the puppy.

“Residents not only don’t have their visitors, but also don’t have that extra staff that would come in for lunch and sit with them,” Price said. “So we are just wanting to give them as much to look forward to and a little dose of happiness.”

Rizzo and Robbins visited several residents throughout the center. Each time the duo entered a room, residents immediately lit up with pure happiness, despite their health conditions.

These little moments of joy in dark times not only meant the world to those in need of care but also to the caregivers.

“This whole ministry was built on service and making sure someone’s last days are their best days,” said Laury Wallace, owner of Life’s Journey Hospice and an Air Force veteran. “We sold everything we owned to keep this place going. We don’t say that as a boast but to say ‘give it up.’ Because if you really want to serve you have to give up a lot. I love it.”

Life’s Journey was no stranger to the economic struggle the pandemic caused in the United States. But Wallace says, despite losing over 1.5 million dollars in 2020, she didn’t focus on that amount. She focused on the more than 3,000 patients she and her center helped since their opening three years ago.

Little Rizzo plans to keep making trips to the hospice center, as an extension of the values instilled in her owner, by the Indiana National Guard.

“Giving back to my community is something that I’ve always tried to do,” Robbins said. “Whether in uniform or out of it, I like to be able to help people.”

Although, the Robbins can’t do it alone.

They encourage others to volunteer to help the most vulnerable during these uncertain times.

Rizzo, Robbins, Price and Wallace all have something incredible in common. They all live their lives with a focus on selfless service to others.