

# Pacifica Tribune



courtesy photo

Scott and Nessie Digre share a laugh in 2016.

## Good dog, Nessie

PACIFICA DOG HONORED FOR SERVICE TO U.S. VETERANS

By Jean Bartlett

Tribune Writer

As Nessie walked past the Chit Chat Cafe in Pacific Manor to have her photo taken oceanside, Amy Kukielka, who co-owns the cafe with her husband Paul, came out to say hello. Nessie was walking with her guardian Erick Digre. The two are well-known among Manor business owners.

"We just love Nessie," Kukielka said. "She's such a great dog."

The VA Health Care System in Palo Alto agrees. On Wednesday, May 8, they honored Nessie at their annual Voluntary Service Recognition Ceremony. She received a beautiful gold pin to acknowledge her 1,000 hours of service to veterans and their families. It was not her first award.

In 2016, Nessie was recognized by the Palo Alto VA for 300 service hours.



"Nessie has been a volunteer with the VA since 2009," Erick said. "But it wasn't until 2011, when we signed up specifically through Palo Alto's Voluntary Service Program, that Nessie's hours began to be recorded."

Twice a week, every week, Nessie and Erick spend three to four hours visiting patients, the families and friends of patients, and staff at the hospital's Hospice and Palliative Care inpatient unit. Erick and Nessie visit wherever they are called. Nessie is often invited to sit on the bed with a patient and she does so without worry regarding wires, tubes or IVs. Should a patient have a seizure while she is visiting, she sits quietly next to them letting them hold onto her while the moment passes. She is a tireless giver of doggie love.



photo by Jean Bartlett

**Recognized volunteer Nessie Digre sits oceanside, across the street from the Chit Chat Cafe.**

Nessie is estimated by Erick and his wife Sue to be 15, though both suspect she is a little older. Nessie was a gift to Erick from his family.

"We met Nessie in October of 2005," Erick said. "I had just returned home from working with disaster relief in New Orleans following the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina."

Erick, a watershed keeper for the City of San Francisco, is a member of the San Francisco Disaster Medical Assistance Team, an EMT and a Red Cross volunteer. While Erick had put his volunteer skills to work at other heart-wrenching disasters prior to Hurricane Katrina, including providing assistance in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, he was having a particularly hard time wrapping his head around all the devastation he saw in New Orleans. He thought having his own dog would help.

The family saw an advertisement on Nessie. She was living on a Border Collie farm. She was not, however, meeting the farm's Border Collie standards. Erick, Sue and their son Scott headed to the Sacramento area and met Nessie.

"She needed a home and I needed her."

Yet he wasn't sure how it would work out with Nessie.

"She liked Sue but she had a real fear of men. She backed away from me with her tail between her legs."

As soon as the family put Nessie in the car and drove away from the farm, everything changed. Nessie perked up and she and Erick became inseparable. Erick had no idea back then that Nessie was a service dog natural.



**Nessie's 1,000 hour volunteer gold pin.**

"A few years after we brought Nessie home, a nurse suggested that Nessie might have it in her to be a good therapy dog. The nurse had seen Nessie a few times at Pacifica's American Legion Post 238 and VFW Post 10245 annual Pier Day in May. Nessie and I would greet veterans as they got off the bus."

On Pier Day, local veterans provide transportation, a fishing event at the Pacifica Pier, and lunch at the Legion Hall to long-term care veterans living at local VA hospitals and their caregivers.

Erick followed the nurse's suggestion and got Nessie certified through Furry Friends as a therapy dog. Since then Nessie has been there to help. Besides donating her time to the Palo Alto VA, her volunteer work has included: supporting first responders following the Oakland Warehouse Fire in 2016, and providing emotional support to families following the 2010 San Bruno Pipeline Explosion. For the latter she received an award.

Nessie's older now. Her vision is failing. She can't leap up on beds at the VA as she did for so many years. Now Erick picks her up and places her next to patients. But she is ready to travel with Erick wherever she is needed. Since she received her 1,000-hours award, she has already donated 12 more hours of service. Her family is very proud of her.

Erick wrote a poem, a portrait of Nessie's work as a Hospice dog. Some of it is presented here.

"She has rested here uncounted times with endless souls. // Some gently stroke her, some talk softly with her, some embrace, kiss her, then weep. // Some lay still as a frozen lake on a December's morn, gulping for a little air, their limbs draped about her. // All love her."

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