



Chaplain Victor Laveaga and Chief with firefighters from Los Angeles County Firehouse 191. Photos taken by and used with permission from Victor Laveaga.

HUGS AND TAIL WAGS

Therapy Dogs Gain Acceptance in First Responder World

By Ken Walker

It's been a year since Pasadena Fire Department Chaplain Victor Laveaga and his therapy dog, Jack, became minor celebrities through an appearance on "Good Morning America."

The ABC Television program featured the duo's work during its January 2025 coverage of the Los Angeles-area wildfires. Multiple fires destroyed thousands of residences and caused damage exceeding \$250 billion.

Sadly, about three months later, 12-year-old Jack breathed his last. Laveaga had to put him to sleep after a mass on his spleen proved malignant.

"Oh, my gosh, I miss him," Victor reflected recently. "He was like family."

Jack had offered solace to fire victims for about two years. His missions of mercy attracted considerable attention last January when LA's enormous destruction became a national news story.

Joining two other department chaplains, Laveaga reported to a base camp established in response to multiple blazes. One touching story involved a firefighter who came to the camp after 30 consecutive hours on duty.

"He was beat up," said Laveaga, who retired from active duty with Pasadena's department in 2010. "You could see it in his face. This guy came over and petted Jack and walked away, then came back. The third time he came up, he hugged Jack's neck, petted him, and started talking."

"When a therapy dog comes alongside and a person starts petting him, it brings 'feel good' hormones, like endorphins and dopamine. Their heart rate comes down, and they feel calm and peaceful."

Finding a Replacement

There's a silver lining in this cloud. Soon after burying his beloved golden retriever, Victor found a dog of the same breed. It was an answer to this prayer: "I want a two-year-old dog that is already trained. Chief would be a great name for a therapy dog."

Soon after, a friend told him about a breeder in the San Diego area who had a two-year-old dog named Chief. But when Laveaga went to the kennel, another dog named Timber caught his eye.

When he asked about Timber, the owner explained the dog was forced into retirement because of a small cataract. Though



Chief takes a well-deserved break.

it didn't affect the show dog's eyesight, they couldn't breed Timber or enter him in competitions.

"I never looked at the other dog," said Victor, who changed Timber's name to Chief. "I fell in love with this guy."

Chief knew so many commands and was so responsive, Victor didn't enroll him in obedience school. Instead, Laveaga conducted training sessions before taking Chief for the American Kennel Club's 10-point examination.

Known as the Canine Good Citizen Test, it gauges a dog's obedience to commands and the handler's control. In mid-September, Chief passed with flying colors.

Next, Laveaga took him through the certification process of First Responder Therapy Dogs (FRTD), the organization that oversaw Jack's admission to the field.

FRTD's screening included a visit to a Los Angeles County fire station. Chief had to remain calm during honking horns, sirens going off, and firefighters rushing by. In mid-October, Laveaga learned that Chief could wear FRTD's colorful vest and on November 4, he became Pasadena Fire Department's official therapy dog.

While Chief hadn't been on any responses by early November, after seeing flare-ups last summer, Laveaga thinks fires represent a year-round possibility in Southern California. That's why he calls Chief's arrival a good thing. Laveaga knows of firefighters who were so overwhelmed a year ago, they delayed returning to duty.

While on his chaplaincy rotations in October, Laveaga chatted with one firefighter who had responded to a house fire a month earlier. The first responder was struggling with the death of a resident he had tried to save.

"Imagine reliving that incident over and over," the chaplain said. "We talked for a long time. After I got home, I let the fire chief know that Chief could be a therapy dog for debriefing sessions to allow firefighters to decompress and let go of emotions.

"A lot of things can happen with fire and police department personnel. They're laying it on the line for people."

POPULAR BREED

Like his predecessor, Jack, therapy dog Chief is also a golden retriever. Handler Victor Laveaga says one reason this breed is a popular choice for therapy duty is their character and reliability.

"Golden retrievers just want to please," the volunteer chaplain said. "Once they understand what you want them to do, they just want to please you. When you pat them on the head, that's their reward."

Retrievers are also a good size, Laveaga said. Although some handlers use smaller dogs, Victor thinks they stand too close to the ground. The chaplain said a retriever's soft hair, which makes it easier to pet, is another advantage.

"And their temperament," Laveaga said. "Now, not all dogs are suited to be therapy dogs, even golden retrievers. Some make good search-and-rescue dogs. When they get their reward, they'll know they were successful."

While therapy dogs have long been used in schools, hospitals, and other settings, they are relatively new in the first responder world. But acceptance is growing, according to Laveaga.

In the fall of 2024, an official with the California Highway Patrol conducting training on various kinds of therapy asked FRTD to have someone explain the use of dogs. Victor took Jack to that session. Still, the January 2025 LA-area wildfires marked the first time emergency responders called for help from chaplains and therapy dogs.

"The whole thing about therapy dogs and peer support groups is brand new," the chaplain said. "When they had a debriefing for firefighters on the Eden fire (one of five major blazes) chaplains were there. It was the first time we had been invited."





The chaplain and Chief are always ready to serve others.

Miracle Story

That the longtime Foursquare Church member was even an established chaplain during the catastrophe is a story in itself. Now in his late 60s, six years after retiring, Laveaga had a sudden thought about stepping into this volunteer position for the department.

He quickly dismissed the idea. Then, one night in a dream, Laveaga sensed God showing him he was going to be a chaplain. Again, he resisted until a series of events convinced him the Lord was calling him to serve.

“I started getting calls from the fire department asking if I would come and pray at different events, and miraculous dreams that verified God was in this,” Victor recalled. “Finally, the fire chief called me in for a meeting and said, ‘We want to ask if you will become a chaplain of the fire department.’”

That touched off a series of educational steps. To obtain a letter of endorsement from his denomination, Laveaga completed two years of training and was later ordained by his LA-area church.

However, once he had accepted the invitation, Victor expressed a misgiving about the assignment — it was too much work for one person.

The chief agreed to add two others. When Laveaga asked two retired firefighters to join him, both said God had also been speaking to them about becoming chaplains.

Dealing with Stress

Three years after Laveaga’s 2020 swearing-in, another change occurred. The department explored the use of therapy dogs to alleviate stress harming employees’ mental and physical health.

That opened the door for Jack, who Laveaga put through FRTD training. The program began with a single dog owned by founder and executive director Heidi Carman in 2021. Carman has a degree in psychology and had worked with American Guide Dogs for the Blind — taking her golden retriever, Kerith,

to meet paramedics in San Rafael, just north of San Francisco. Kerith got along so well, Carman started taking the dog to visit other first responders.

“A total of 11 FRTD teams served during the LA wildfires,” said Tracy Ryan, the group’s East Coast director of operations. This Massachusetts high school guidance counselor, married to a firefighter/paramedic, had long been interested in training her dog for therapy.

An online search led her to FRTD. In August of 2022 Ryan and Sparkie, her five-year-old Australian Labradoodle, became the first to complete the group’s certification process. FRTD recently welcomed its 500th team.

Today, Carman is FRTD’s only full-time employee, with Ryan drawing a small stipend for coordinating teams in the eastern U.S. Its certification process is handled through local dog trainers.

While therapy dogs have long been a presence in American life (more than 50,000 are on duty nationally), Ryan says getting into the first responder community has taken longer because of the stigma about asking for help.

“My spouse is a first responder, so it’s helped me connect with departments in this area,” says Ryan, who lives in East Bridgewater, about 30 miles south of Boston. “But at first, when I called departments and said ‘therapy,’ there was a hesitation.”

“First responders’ mental health has gotten more publicity over the last three to five years. But there’s still a lot of work to be done for first responders to get the help they need for depression, anxiety, and PTSD.”

Helping Residents

First responders aren’t the only people whose lives are touched by therapy dogs. When Victor and Jack visited various evacuation centers during the wildfires, numerous residents flocked to the dog’s side to pet and hug him.

At one center, Laveaga snapped a photo of a group of children from half a dozen ethnicities, all hugging Jack while parents stood in the background, tears rolling down their faces.

“You can imagine the turmoil these folks were in,” the chaplain said. “They had just lost their school and the apartments they were living in had burned down. That was an amazing thing to see. It was a team effort with the other chaplains and Jack, and the Holy Spirit guiding us.”

In addition to comforting firefighters and citizens, the LA wildfires helped reveal what will benefit Pasadena’s chaplains in the future. Whether at a huge disaster or in quieter settings, Laveaga plans to continue serving God by serving others. That will often mean taking Chief along.

One of the best tools for relieving stress and anxiety caused by the grueling encounters first responders face is to open up and tell their story; Laveaga said that is an emotionally-charged experience for many.

The chaplain said that often-reticent firefighters opening up is the opposite of what the devil wants: for personnel to bottle up their emotions, which can lead to depression and suicidal thoughts.

“That’s what therapy dogs do and the presence of chaplains too,” Victor said. “That’s why chaplaincy is called a ministry of presence. The phrase we use with Firefighters for Christ International is: ‘Just show up.’ All we have to do is show up and God will work.



Chief and the chaplain find joy in their work.

“We pray every day before we go out and ask God to give us the words to open doors of opportunity. We must trust God and His Holy Spirit when He comes. We trust God for His promises. He answers prayer.” †



Ken Walker is a freelance writer from Huntington, West Virginia and a past contributor to Today’s Christian Living. He has written thousands of magazine, newspaper and website articles during his career — many award winning. He has also co-authored or contributed to dozens of books and devotionals.

THE GOOD NEWS



Photo credit: © Jimni / Adobe Stock

Winter is a cold, dark place in the Upper Midwest. And quiet; so quiet you can almost hear your thoughts bouncing off the naked trees. Once the sun sets, which is quite early, it’s downright tomblike.

A typical northern winter night is an excellent picture of life apart from Christ. Those who do not walk in the light stumble along a dark path without the warmth of God’s love to ward off the cold. They hear only their own thoughts resonating in the vast emptiness. There is no reassuring voice of the Holy Spirit to guide, comfort, or remind them they are safe and secure in the hands of a kind Father.

If you are stumbling along a dark and cold path, look to Jesus — the light of the world. His compassion sent Him to the cross to pay the penalty for your sins. He didn’t have to die. He was sinless and free from the wages of sin; death. He chose to take your place so your sins could be forgiven, your debt could be paid, and you could be washed clean in Christ’s shed blood — worthy to stand before a holy God.

When you confess to God you have done what is evil in His sight, ask His forgiveness, and begin to follow Him, the Light of the World (Jesus) walks with you. He sheds light on the path ahead. He warms you with His presence. And you begin to hear His still, small voice leading you along the path He has chosen for you. Why not begin walking with Jesus today? Here’s what He says about His followers:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

— 1 Peter 2:9-10