Lending a helping ‘paw’

Veterans gifted companion dogs through country star Brantley Gilbert

Custom Canine Unlimited’s Samuel Allen (left) and Emon Baker (right) stand alongside Brantley Gilbert, Amanda Hensley and Marine Corps veteran Jason Hassinger backstage at Gilbert’s concert held Feb. 3 in Albany, N.Y. Hassinger, a Silver Star and Purple Heart recipient and veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, was selected to receive companion dog Charlie.

They say a dog is man’s best friend—and through the generosity of country music star Brantley Gilbert and several partners, eight deserving veterans are being paired with new canine companions.

“There is nothing like the loyalty, love and companionship of
a dog,” said Gilbert. “For some people, a dog can connect, unlike even a best friend, for those who gave beyond the call of duty to our nation.”

Gilbert partnered with DAV to identify veterans who would benefit from the addition of a four-legged friend in their lives, to be gifted as part of his 2018 U.S. tour. Each dog was professionally trained by Custom Canine Unlimited and paired with a veteran and his or her family. Pedigree also joined the partnership and will provide a year’s supply of dog food for each veteran’s dog.

“I love the idea of matching them up with dogs specially trained for the task of getting their lives to a better place,” Gilbert said.

DAV life member Jason Hassinger, of Chapter 15 in Philadelphia, was paired with his dog, Charlie, backstage at Gilbert’s Albany, N.Y., concert in February.

“Brantley was amazingly humble, and you could tell his care for veterans is very genuine,” said Hassinger, who earned a Silver Star for gallantry in Afghanistan. “Charlie has become a friend and an incredible addition to our family.”

Crystall Keiser-Plunkett, a member of DAV Chapter 38, in Tifton, Ga., said the experience of receiving her canine companion, Athena, was life-changing for her and her family.

“Bringing Athena into our lives has brought joy, happiness and has even decreased my anxiety,” she said. “Athena ensures I don’t lie around all day. She wakes me with kisses in the morning, my kids and I spend the days playing with her, and she’s right beside me at night. I’m so glad someone like Brantley thinks about us veterans.”

“This partnership illustrates how DAV transforms the lives of veterans and their families,” said National Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster. “I’m very thankful Brantley partnered with us
and used his platform to amplify our mission of service.”