Service Dogs Aid Mobility for All

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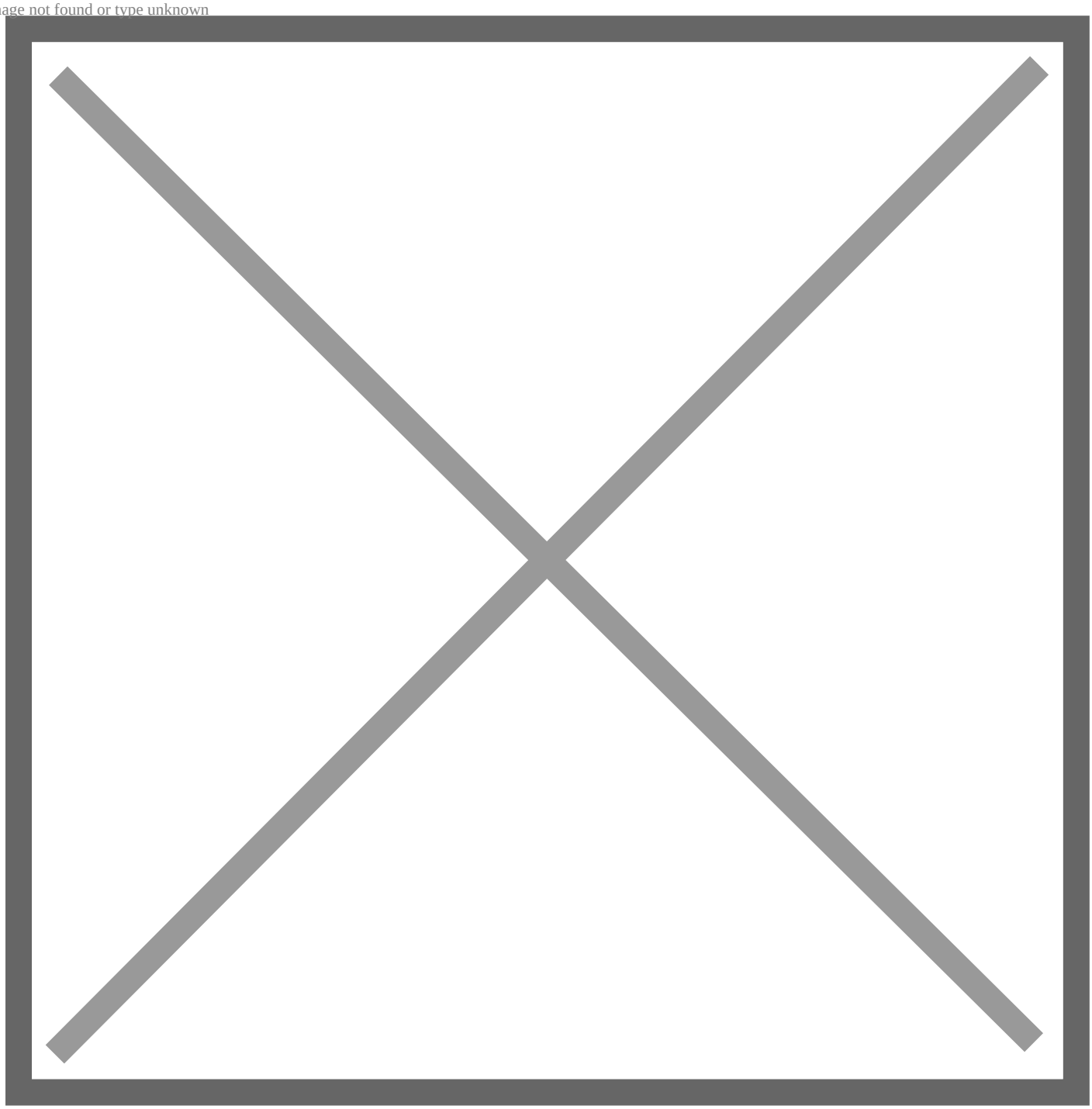
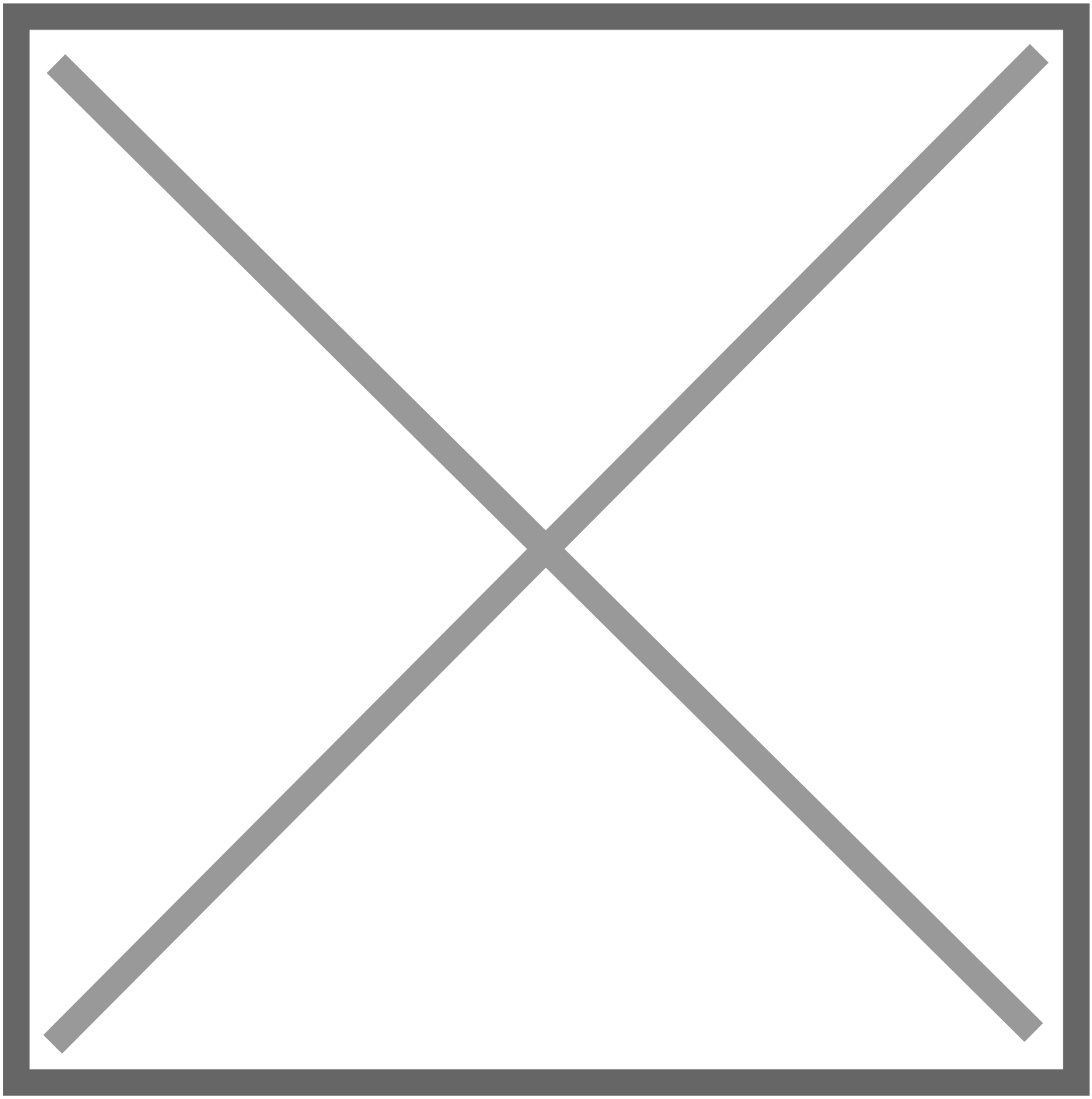


Before the directive to work from home, anyone who saw Toyota team member and Army veteran Carlos De Jesus on campus also saw one of Toyota's most popular team members out for a walk—on four legs. Sergeant Nick is the hardworking service dog trained to ease his human companion's way through the world.

“He goes pretty much everywhere with me,” says De Jesus, a manager on the dealer experience team. “He goes to work and sits under my desk — he even has his own work badge. I think everyone is more mellow and productive when Nick is around because he just puts a smile on everyone’s face.”

De Jesus served in the United States Army for 21 years, serving multiple rotations overseas, including five trips to Afghanistan. Altogether, the veteran spent three and a half years of his life in combat. Two years ago, De Jesus was still completing rehab at the VA when he heard about Patriot PAWS, a nonprofit organization that trains services dogs to place with veterans. In a fitting moment of synchronicity, by the time his Toyota team was invited to tour the organization’s Rockwell facility, De Jesus had already submitted his application.

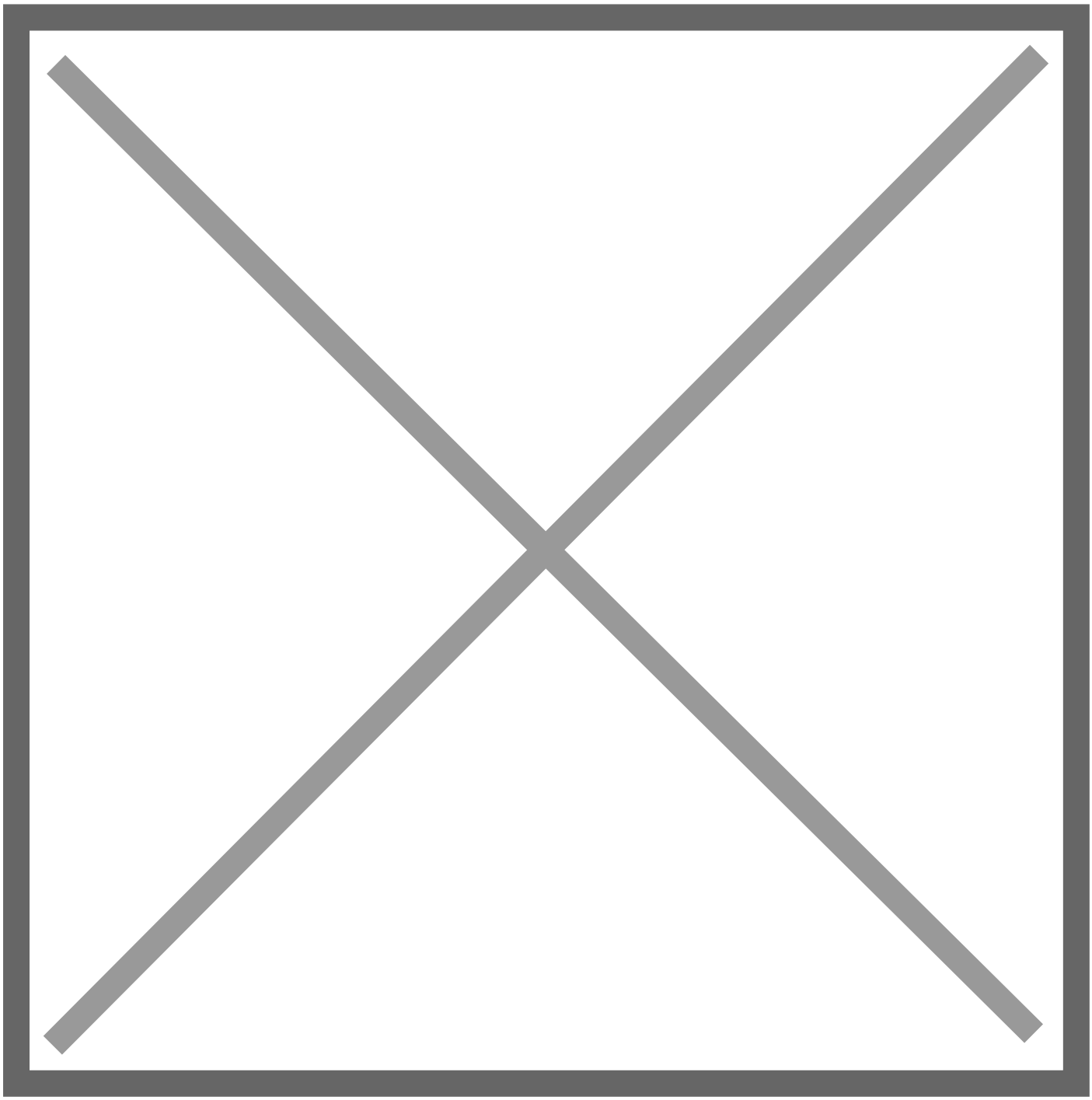


Sergeant Nick and Carlos De Jesus

“Although Toyota had supported the organization in the past, when I started the placement process, no one else at the Plano campus had a service dog,” he says. “But Toyota was great about it.”

De Jesus, who grew up around dogs, immediately recognized how a service dog could help a veteran like him transition from military to civilian life. He was paired with Sergeant Nick — a two-year-old yellow lab named

after the real Sergeant Nick, a WWII veteran and supporter of Patriot PAWS — and now, the duo has been working side by side for two years.



Sergeant Nick the dog with his namesake, WWII veteran Sergeant Nick

Service Dogs 101

Patriot PAWS, based in Rockwall, Texas, trains service dogs to place with veterans—at no cost to them—across the country. Since its founding in 2006, the organization has placed approximately 260 service dogs in about 30 states.

The dogs go through 18 to 24 months of training, at a cost of $35,000 per dog. According to Sharon Satterwhite, director of development at Patriot PAWS, that number usually gives people some sticker shock.

“That cost includes everything from beginning to end,” Satterwhite says. “From the procurement costs of the puppy to placing the dog and training with the veterans to post-placement follow-ups. High-quality training is not a quick thing — we can only train so many dogs at once.”

The service pups in training start out at the Rockwall campus, where they learn basics, before being placed with a volunteer puppy raiser in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, a student at Texas A&M University, or an inmate trainer through a program with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Finally, the dogs go back to Rockwall for final trainings, graduation and placement.

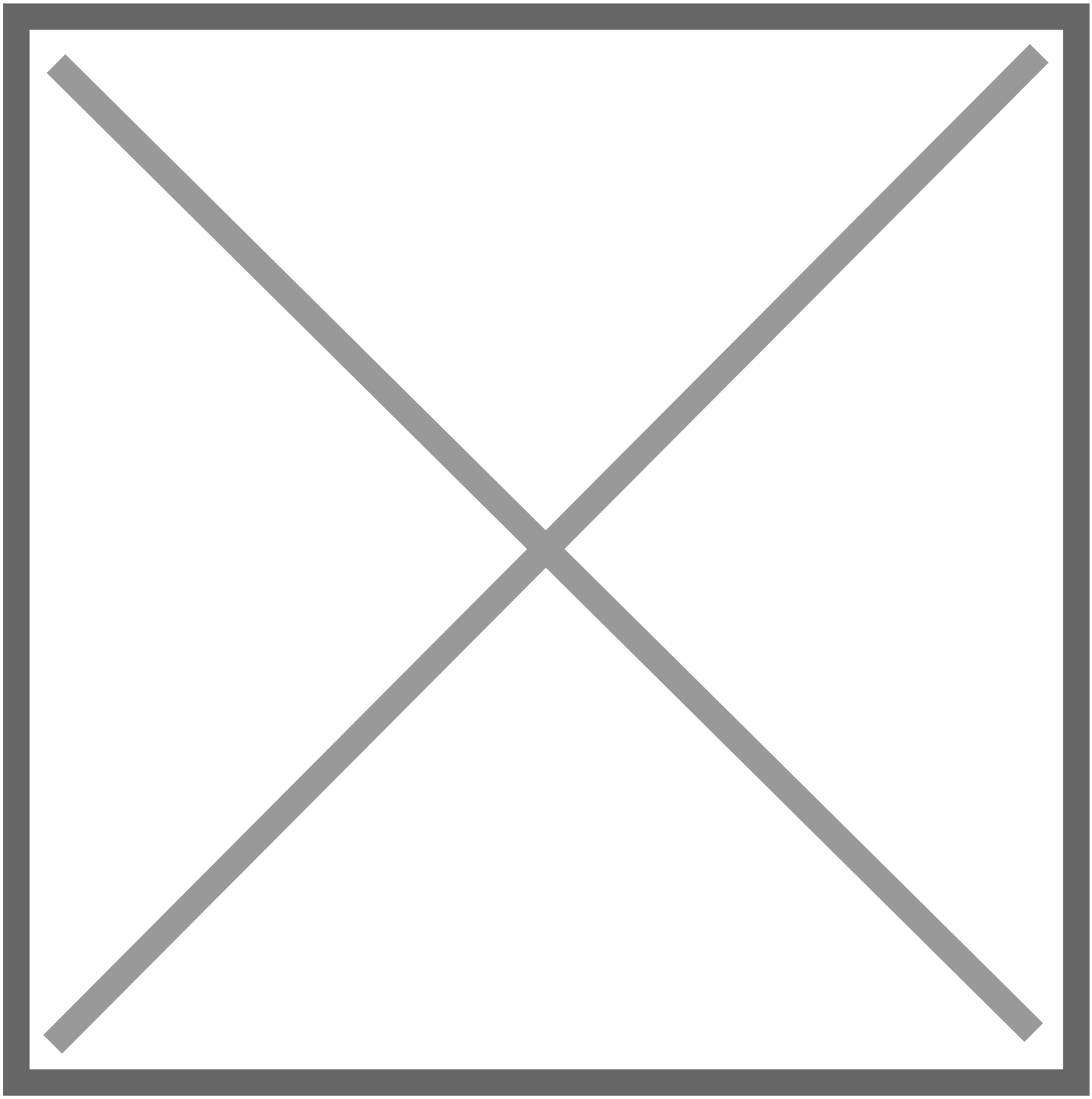
By the time the dogs graduate, they know at least 52 basic cues, including: open and close doors, pick up dropped items, set a wheelchair in place, and even help with laundry. After a dog is placed, he or she can be taught more specific commands depending on the veteran’s needs.

“Beyond the everyday tasks, one important way our dogs help veterans is simply by providing a calming presence,” Satterwhite says. “As anyone who has dogs knows, they have a very nonjudgmental presence, one that is always there to listen.”

Helping Veterans Find Mobility

One of Toyota’s core values is respect for people, and part of that belief is championing respect for animals. The Patriot PAWS program is supported within Toyota by ToyoPets, one of Toyota’s Business Partnering Groups (BPG), formed to encourage team member engagement and bolster diversity and inclusion. ToyoPets members are a passionate community of animal advocates.

In addition, another BPG, the Toyota Veterans Association, raises awareness of the work done by Patriot PAWS, which is funded by donations, and provides information to veterans about service dogs. Toyota also sponsored the training of Cruiser, a service puppy currently working hard in the Patriot PAWS Aggieland Program at Texas A&M, according to Satterwhite. Carlos De Jesus has stayed in touch with the organization, demonstrating the capabilities of service dogs by bringing Nick to fundraisers and other activities.



Cruiser, Toyota’s sponsored service puppy in the Patriot PAWS Aggieland Program at Texas A&M

After about four months together, De Jesus and Nick attended their first big outing as a duo, an event for Patriot PAWS. Only 10 or 15 minutes into the event, Nick starting nudging at his human partner’s leg — the cue to go outside.

“I was like, man, I guess he needs to go out already,” De Jesus says. “But once we got outside, I felt a huge sense of relief. I guess I was starting to get anxious in the crowd without realizing, and Nick knew what I needed

and provided for me before I even recognized it myself."

If De Jesus had to name one thing that Nick has done for him, it would be helping the veteran return to the person he was before entering the service.

"In my experience," says De Jesus, "a service dog can help improve a veteran's quality of life not only with the physical disabilities and mental health issues, but with individuals that are more reserved or closed in. Service dogs can do so much to help people get back out there and go to places that they haven't been able to go to in a very long time."

Satterwhite says that helping veterans feel mobile again is the true purpose of Patriot PAWS, whether that's providing assistance with everyday tasks or supporting mental health.

"I think when people hear the word 'mobility' they think of physical, visible disabilities that could immobilize a veteran, like an amputated leg," Satterwhite says. "And of course, these dogs can help with that. But our veterans have told us story after story about coming home from a long deployment and feeling on high alert all the time, so the only place they feel safe is isolated from everybody. It's those unseen issues that can really immobilize a veteran.

"I think what mobility means to us is veterans having the freedom to get some of their life back," Satterwhite continues. "Our veterans sometimes sacrifice their independence to protect us. So, what we try to do is provide something that can give some of that independence back to them."