DELAWARE Wave

Tuesday, September 11, 2012 [delmarvaNOW!.com] Bethany Beach, Del. | Free

Man's best friend

Dalmatian rescued Millsboro resident from World Trade Center wreckage

By Jon Bleiweis
Staff Writer

MILLSBORO — They say a dog is man's best friend. For Millsboro resident Hugh Thornton, his dog, Sam, is not only his best friend, but his hero.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Thornton was a building inspector for the New York City Building Department. He worked for the city for 14 years, and at the time, had been a lifelong resident of the Bronx.

What happened that morning is something the country will never forget — a pair of hijacked airplanes crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center complex. Immediately, Thornton and his department rushed to the scene to examine what happened.

While evaluating the damage, he became trapped by debris that fell on top of him. He was trapped at his ankles, and then completely buried, with the exception of his right hand.

For two hours, he was trapped, hoping someone would notice him. Survival was nothing new for Thornton — as a sergeant in the Army, he was a prisoner of war during the Korean War.

See RESCUE, Page 5

Hugh Thornton with his dog Sam at their home in Mariners Cove near Millsboro.

CHUCK SNYDER/DELAWARE WAVE

Rescue

Continued from Page 1

He, indeed, was noticed, by a rescue dog — a 3-year-old Dalmatian named Sam.

"It was bad news, I was buried," he said. "My hand was up, just my hand. I could see the dog's eyes looking at me, and I was just hoping and saying 'Please, God, don't leave. Stay right where you are.' And he stayed."

During that time, Sam kept licking Thornton's hand, as he continued to howl for human attention to help him get out.

"I was very fearful, but as long as that dog stayed there, it calmed me right down," he said. "He just stayed, his eyes were just looking right down at me. He was staying. I just had that feeling."

It took two hours for rescue crews to find Sam and Thornton, and then they pried him out of the rubble. Thornton escaped with a pair of broken ankles.

"I felt broken up, but thankful. Just thankful," he said. "I couldn't believe what was going on."

Shortly after, Sam was given to Thornton as a gift, as the Dalmatian was retired from service. Since then, he hasn't left his side.

Today, Thornton, now 83, can be found painting at Unique Boutiques in Lewes, where he sells his works, or giving painting tips and lessons to people of all ages around the county, which he's been doing for five years, since he moved to Delaware.

Painting is something Thornton has been doing since he was 12 years old. Included in his painting resume is work for Frank Sinatra.

The craft relaxes him. A common motif in his paintings is Sam; whether it's a painting of a girl in bed, or a landscape of Cooperstown, N.Y., he tries to get the Dalmatian in the painting.

He said he has about 15 students.

"I think I'm here for a reason," he said. "To me, it's God's gift. I give the gift of art to people and teach them and I don't charge them. I have ladies 95 years old and in walkers painting and going, 'look what I did,' and it just makes me feel good."

At Unique Boutiques, a space for artists to create and showcase their work, one of his colleagues, Chris Holtgrewe of Laz-It Engraving, said Thornton is an inspiration.

"When you hear about how his life has been and all the stuff that he's experienced, it kind of pushes you to do a little bit more with yours," Holtgrewe said. "It's enlightening when you speak with him."

Theresa Jennette, owner of Beach Bumz Gifts and manager at Unique Boutiques, said Thornton is wonderful to talk to.

"He's had more adventures in his lifetime, I think, than 10 people have had in theirs," she said. "Every time you talk to him, there's something else that comes out of him."

Included in his skills set is his teaching, she said.

"He is a wonderful art teacher," she said. "I've seen people bring children in here, and he'll sit and work with them. It's amazing."

One of those children was Holtgrewe's 9-year-old daughter, Amanda, and it was an impromptu 5-minute lesson.

"He just walked over one afternoon and she was playing with one of these pieces of wood that I had, and he's showing her a couple brush strokes," he said. "When Mom got here, she was like 'all right, who painted it' and I said Amanda did. Hugh just showed her a couple of strokes, but it just came out amazing."

As for Sam, now 14, he can be found each night sleeping at the foot of Thornton's bed and continues to be dedicated to and protective of his owner.

"He's my best buddy," Thornton said. "My hero."

jbleiweis@dmg.gannett.com