



Lisa's real-life Fable

TEAM—Lisa Washington and Fable with a Homeland Security jet in May.

Photos submitted

Morenci grad, canine partner keep travel safe

By JEFF JOHNSTON

Lisa Washington didn't join the military in response to 9/11.

She'd done that years before, when she left Morenci in the 1980s.

But when she saw the section of the Pentagon where she'd guarded three secretaries of the U.S. Navy smoldering after the 2001 terror attack, her life changed course nonetheless.

If things had been different, "it could have been me" among the 125 dead at the Pentagon, she said.

Somehow, somewhere, she would do her part to prevent another attack.

It took a little while, but after stints with the Navy, the Department of Education and the National Science Foundation, Lisa found herself living in Waldron with her family and eyeing a new opportunity in Lansing working for the Department of Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration.

Today, she's the public face of the TSA's canine screening program in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Well, maybe the public face is that of her canine partner, Fable, a 52-pound black Labrador retriever. She's the one people seem most interested in, and that's OK with Lisa.

"I would be nothing without her," she said. "She's the one with the nose."

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Lisa grew up in Morenci as Lisa Davis, part of a large farm family whose members — five siblings, cousins and more — mostly still live around the area, including her mother, Sandy.

Around town, she laughed, "I'm the one Davis girl they always forget about."

After Lisa graduated from Morenci High School in 1980, it wasn't clear what would come next. Unemployment was high. She babysat, worked at a card shop in the Adrian Mall. College didn't seem right for her. Still, she wanted something more.

One day, while her parents were off fishing, a military recruiter at the mall struck up a conversation with her.

"When they came back from their fishing trip," Lisa said, "I'd enlisted in the Marine Corps."

She said they were shocked — her family didn't have a tradition of military service — but maybe they shouldn't have been.

In high school, Coach Kay Johnson made



COLLECTIBLE—Lisa hands out cards with Fable's picture to kids who show interest.

a strong impression on Lisa, who played basketball, softball and volleyball.

"She taught me, if anything, hard work, a good work ethic. ... She made a huge impact on me."

And then there was farm life. When people asked Lisa how she could keep up with basic training, she told them being in the Marines was nothing compared with being on a farm.

"Marines work you eight hours a day," she said. "At a farm you work I don't know how many hours." Also, the Marines pay you. On the farm, your parents might not.

Lisa, now 54, joined the Marines at age 21 and stayed 11 years.

"I've never, ever had a regret," she said.

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Speaking of large families, Lisa and her husband, Elphanso, whom she met in 2006, have assembled their own. Lisa gave birth to four children, adopted her husband's three (now ages 17, 15 and 12), adopted two foster children (sisters ages 8 and 5) — and in 2014 had another baby, Elisa, at age 52.

Work as a TSA inspector took her to Richmond, Virginia, then to Charlotte.

The family now lives in Chester, South Carolina, about 40 miles south of Charlotte. Elphanso, retired, stays home with the kids — a "slacker," Lisa jokes.

Their home is a huge former bed and breakfast, and people sometimes ask whether they plan to open it for business.

"No, obviously not," she says, "we've got enough children to fill it up."

When Lisa was in Richmond, her boss had four new canine handler positions to

fill for the TSA's explosives detection program. Working with dogs was a natural fit for Lisa.

"I love animals," she said. "Growing up on a farm, I was always around animals."

So in 2012, Lisa set off for 12 weeks of canine training at Auburn University in Alabama.

After a few days, program organizers paired each recruit with a young dog that suited his or her personality and work style.

One-year-old Fable was "pretty laid back, but when it comes to work she was pretty serious." Just like Lisa.

"Training was pretty intense," she said, and most of the trainees were much younger. But she made it through with special honors.

"I never look at failure as an option," she said.

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Unlike some bomb-detecting dogs that sniff empty rooms or suspicious packages, or police dogs that can help chase down or disarm suspects, these TSA dogs are trained to check people passing by for any traces of explosive material.

As her handler, it's Lisa's job to read the dog's behavior. Other officers and agents focus on the people.

Fable is from a line of service dogs bred specifically for this work.

"They made, you might say, the ultimate sniffing dog," Lisa said.

Dogs in the program are named alphabetically, and Fable is one of nine dogs in the "F" litter, eight of which are working. They can expect to be on the job until they're eight to 12 years old. When Fable retires, she'll continue to live with Lisa and her family.

Because the dogs will work with noses just an inch from the people they're screening, they're disqualified from serving if they show even the slightest aggression. They learn to find and react to contraband through encouragement and positive reinforcement — basically, being rewarded with praise and toys.

While most any dog likes to chase a stick, a tennis ball or a Frisbee, dogs like Fable are trained to the point of obsession. In fact, handlers are cautioned to end games of fetch before the dogs collapse of exhaustion or dehydration.

"They don't give up," Lisa said.

The monetary value of all of this breeding and training is more than \$500,000 per dog, Lisa said, but that's the wrong way to think about it.

"You can't really put a price tag on her, because what's the price of the lives she

could save?"

Lisa said she can't help but think that if dogs like Fable had been in the crowd at the 2013 Boston Marathon, the two bombers could have been caught before triggering the blasts that killed three and injured more than 250.

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Lisa and Fable's work hours are "usually early, early morning," starting an eight-hour day at maybe 4 a.m. But the hours aren't regular. Facing unknown threats, "we have to be unpredictable," she said.

They don't always work airports. In fact, they worked the route of the Anthem Richmond Marathon in the morning just hours before Lisa gave birth to Elisa in 2014.

But on airport duty, they can help speed up long screening lines.

"She sniffs, within a half-hour time, ... close to 1,000 people," Lisa said — people who then don't need to have their bags manually swept for explosives residue. "Most of the time they run out of people (in line) before we run out of time."

There are some "false positives" along the way. Sometimes it doesn't take much to trigger a dog's super senses. Fable once sniffed out a single nitroglycerin heart pill enclosed in its bottle, sealed inside a baggie and packed into a suitcase. Even the chemicals in some hand lotions can set a dog off.

There's ongoing training, too, with plain-clothes agents hiding contraband in bags, pockets, even under their hats.

"She finds something every single day," Lisa said.

And while doing that, "she puts a smile on people's faces."

Even though Fable wears a sign that says "do not pet," at least once a day someone will approach intending to do so. Fable would love it, but Lisa has to intervene. Sure, it's most likely innocent, but she has to consider that it could be a deliberate diversion — one person distracting the dog while another slips past.

Lisa even has to say no to kids, but she hands out cards with Fable's name and picture as a consolation.

"They get a trading card, but they don't get to pet my dog," she said.

Not everyone loves dogs, of course, and there are times when Lisa has to help someone cope as Fable does her job of sniffing around them. She'll encourage the person to look at her own face, not at the dog.

If she and Fable ever encounter a real threat, Lisa's role is to notify the appropriate responders, including those she works with side by side. Lisa's job isn't to apprehend anyone.

"My No. 1 responsibility is to my dog," she said.