

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness



Inmate Dog-Training
Programs Transform Life
on the Inside and Outside

By Carla Schack



What could be more heartwarming than a disabled teenager being united with an assistance dog — a companion who will give him his first chance at true independence? What if the dog had been rescued from a shelter to be trained and given his or her own second chance at life? What if all of the supplies and veterinary care needed for the dog's training had been donated by caring individuals and companies? What could be more heartwarming than that?

The interesting fact is that the trainer handing over this very special dog is an inmate at a minimum-security prison. Participation in the assistance dog-training program not only allows inmates to give something back to society, but truly helps them look to the future and prepare for a better life after prison.

When administrators at the Sanger B. Powers Correctional Facility in Wisconsin started its "Liberty Dog" assistance dog training program, they weren't trying to create the most heartwarming and rewarding moments possible. They were simply trying out a new idea. The concept inspired more and more support, ultimately succeeding beyond anyone's expectations.

The Last Chance

In 1981, Sister Pauline Quinn, a Dominican nun, began advocating for programs using prison inmates as fosterers for future assistance dogs.

She had personal experience with the potential for change that comes from a dog's unconditional love. "I had had a hard life," she said, "and a dog had helped my life." The idea of assistance dogs for the disabled was still fairly new at the time, and Sister Pauline trained "Erin," a Shetland sheepdog, in the basic skills to demonstrate the idea's potential. The first "Prison Pet Partnership Program" was in a maximum-security women's prison in Washington State. Today, the program is still active. The Lifetime Channel aired a movie on August 20 entitled, "Within These Walls," about that original program. Produced by and starring Ellen Burstyn, the film tells the story of a hardened criminal redeemed by her work with the dogs. The dogs for that program came exclusively from shelter "death row." Sister Pauline was enthusiastic about making the movie, and her current dog "Pax" was given a cameo role towards the end.



Left, above: A graduate from the inmate dog-training program with his new human partner.

Left, below: Inmates gather in front of the Liberty Dog Program sign, painted by an inmate, with the dogs they are training.

Above: One of the first group of inmates in the Liberty Dog Program with the puppies they are training to assist the disabled.

Sister Pauline was also active in starting the Liberty Dog Program in Wisconsin. Working with June Ashford, of the Golrusk Pet Care Center in Green Bay, and Warden Dan Bertrand of the Green Bay Correctional Institution, Sister Pauline convinced the department of corrections that the program working in Washington could also work in

Wisconsin. Originally, the Liberty Dog program had been planned for the Green Bay Correctional Institute, a maximum-security prison. But concerns about running the program within the state maximum-security guidelines made that impractical, and the program found a better fit at the minimum security Sanger B. Powers prison. An old farm shop on the prison grounds was assigned to the project.

A start-up grant from the local Cornerstone Foundation, along with diligent volunteer efforts, helped the Liberty Dog program to debut in June 1997. The remodeled shop housed a kennel for up to 10 dogs. A training



June Ashford, of the Golrusk Pet Care Center in Green Bay, helps an inmate train his dog.

area, supplies and equipment were donated from the community. Local trainers worked with a group of inmate volunteers, instructing them on how to train the dogs. Members of that first group have since recruited and trained new volunteers from within the prison. Over 20 dogs have graduated from the inmate-training program.

Basic Training

The dogs enter the Liberty Dog program as puppies, from breeders or humane societies. According

to Bob Kent, the superintendent of the facility, the humane societies were initially nervous about the idea. However, after representatives observed the program in action and watched how inmates interacted with the dogs, they became supportive. Now shelters across the state alert the Liberty Dog program if they get in a dog of the right size, age and temperament. Kent says that their trust hasn't been disappointed: "I've never had an inmate abuse a dog."

After screening for hip dysplasia (common among larger dogs and an unacceptable disability for a service dog who will have to stay active), the puppies begin basic training. Basic obedience and other universal tasks that are usually helpful to wheelchair-bound individuals are learned and practiced. This includes picking up an object and giving it to the trainer or flipping on a light switch. Interactions with their primary trainer as well as other prison inmates and staff helps dogs build social skills. Socializing with the two program cats, Thelma and Louise, also helps to guarantee not only that the dogs can be placed with a cat guardian, but that they will focus on their responsibilities and commands without being distracted by squirrels or other tempting diversions.

When a dog has mastered basic training, usually at six months to a year old, he or she is matched with his or her future human partner. Likely candidates for an assistance dog are referred by social workers from around the state.

Candidates fill out a form that includes listing their specific medical condition, additional needs and abilities — information normally provided by a doctor. They are then placed on a waiting list. When the candidate enters the program for the first time, he or she is placed in a room with four to six dogs who are ready to be paired. According to Kent, dogs and humans have chosen each other within a half hour, and the bond between the two is stronger than if they had been placed together at random.

Transforming Lives on the Outside...

In addition to the day-to-day help that the dogs provide, the human partner experiences an incredible sense of freedom and increased morale when paired with the dogs. This is especially visible with youthful recipients. Superintendent Kent has received letters and follow-up calls from parents and grandparents praising the change in a child or teen's outlook. Sometimes they admit that their own behavior has changed, too. Kent comments that many parents don't realize that their own over-protectiveness may stunt a disabled child, until the presence of an assistance animal shows them just how much the child may be capable of on his or her own. For a person of any age, the dog opens up new possibilities of independence that may have seemed permanently closed.

...and the Inside

But the benefits of the Liberty Dog programs and others like it don't just happen outside the prison walls. The effect on inmates, both those directly working with the program and those who get a chance to pet or play with the dogs, has been startling. Kent has noticed a definite drop in inmate problems since the introduction of the dogs. In other prison programs, the dogs are used in both formal and informal counseling and even help inmates relax before facing a parole board. Part of it is the importance of touch.

In many prisons, inmates are not allowed to have physical contact with each other, and displays of any sort of gentle emotion could be feared as seeming "weak." This enforces a sense of emotional isolation and can



The inmates are careful to protect their dogs.

June Ashford helps an inmate prepare to bathe a dog.





A young boy receives this German shepherd who was trained by one of the inmates to assist him.

prove to be difficult, especially for new prisoners.

The dogs provide a safe and non-violent outlet for physical contact and emotional displays. Wherever they wander within the facility, inmates stop to pet and talk to them, not embarrassed to show affection. Sargent McGovern, the new Liberty Dog program coordinator, did not expect the program to reveal changes in the prison population. "These guys are softening up a little, emotionally. I think any animal

has the potential to do that."

Superintendent Kent attributes some of the improvements to the dogs' ability to give unconditional love. "The dogs don't care about your skin or your crime," he comments. "This helps [the inmates] get in touch with their feelings and makes them more able to cope on the outside." Paroled prisoners have reported that their experience with the dogs has made it easier to return to their families and interact with their children.

If the impact on the overall prison population has been notable, the results on those inmates who actually work with the dogs are even more impressive. Chris Sutton became involved in the program a few months after coming to Sanger B. Powers for robbery. A year and a half later, he feels that the Liberty Dog program has changed the direction of his life. While he first initially became involved because he likes dogs in general, he says, "After I found out that I could train the dogs to do these things and help people out, I got really involved." Chris has been around dogs all his life, but has never known how to train them. Now he says that he's "fallen in love with training dogs."

Giving Something Back

Along with the same benefits of contact with the animals that the general prison population receives, the dog trainers feel satisfaction of giving back to the community and seeing a real concrete return on their work. "How many chances do you get to help someone out while in prison?" Chris asks. "What really makes me enjoy this program is the finished product — seeing the dogs with the recipient and what they can do for him or her." Of course, the trainers also have to learn to deal with a bittersweet loss. For all his pride in seeing an animal placed, Chris also says that the hardest part is letting it go.

Chris himself is likely to leave the program soon. Sargent McGovern has written a letter to his parole board — the first one he has ever written for an inmate. At 24, Chris is working to turn his life around. He hopes to continue the work he's started training for within the prison walls. He is looking into professional dog training schools

and hopes to make a career of it. Chris has nothing but praise for the Liberty Dog program and others like it. "There's nothing better for rehabilitation purposes."

The Liberty Dog program is not an exact copy of Sister Pauline's first program in Washington, and other programs around the country have continued to develop in individual ways. With programs in at least 10 states, prison puppies are raised by men and women, in minimum, maximum and mixed security facilities, living in kennels or sleeping beside their inmate trainer's bed. While it is too early in the Liberty Dog program to make long-term judgements about how participants will do on the outside, the data from the first Prison Pet Partnership program in Washington State is encouraging. As of 1997, 100 percent of the inmates released from that program had found employment. Additionally, between 1994 and 1997, the recidivism rate for participants was zero.

Superintendent Kent has great hopes for the rehabilitating effects of the Liberty Dog Program. "When [the trainers] see a 10-or 12-year-old person who is wheelchair-bound getting that dog and taking him home, you just can't buy that kind of therapy."

And you can't make up that kind of happy ending.

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