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Teaming Incarcerated Youth with Shelter Dogs For a Second Chance

The Animal Humane Association of New Mexico, Inc. and the Youth Diagnostic and Development Center of New Mexico

Numerous studies have noted the prevalence of non-human animal abuse in the backgrounds of adult criminal offenders (Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Lockwood & Ascione, 1998). Other studies have discussed the efficacy of animal - assisted therapy and education programs in prison settings (Szaraval, 2000). *Project Second Chance*, a training program in Albuquerque, New Mexico, teams older teenage offenders with shelter dogs to foster empathy, community responsibility, kindness, and an awareness of healthy social interactions.

Realizing that this program was somewhat innovative compared to other youth-intervention programs, we decided to share some of our results with other researchers and practitioners who might be interested in this type of humane education. Because we are practitioners, not social scientists, what follows is an anecdotal description of the program, describing the effect on all participants, dogs, young people,

staff, and adopters. We believe an intervention program such as this will have a long-term effect that, in the future, other researchers could measure, and we invite readers to contribute to this worthy goal. In this essay, we introduce only a summary of our initial observations.

In the spring of 2000, the Youth Diagnostic and Development Center of New Mexico (YDDC) asked the Animal Humane Association of New Mexico (AHANM) to participate in this program. Planned by Tamara Ward, the program would transfer four or five shelter dogs at moderate risk for euthanasia to the state prison for youth offenders. During a three-week training program, these dogs learn basic obedience such as sit, stay, come, and heel. They are housed in kennels on the campus, and only the participants are permitted two to three visits a day. In addition, the young people receive a basic course in dog grooming. A local trainer and animal-groomer assist with these courses.

During the three weeks, they would keep the kennel areas clean, walk the dogs three times a day, and spend two hours in the afternoons training, grooming, and socializing. More experienced participants were often retained as peer counselors and often intervened when trainers would lose their tempers with more challenging dogs. When dogs showed signs of illness such as diarrhea, kennel cough, infection from surgery sutures, and conjunctivitis, the participants would be required to medicate the companion animals.

Because AHANM is a shelter that euthanizes, the animals chosen for *Project Second Chance* were being given a second chance at finding a new home. We chose those who would respond to training but who also would present a new challenge to a young person who probably had little or no experience with formal training methods. The dogs were surrendered to the shelter for a variety of reasons: hyperactivity, jumping, house soiling, chewing, and separation anxiety. Many had been strays.

The teenagers also were being incarcerated for a variety of reasons. Many had been involved with gangs, drugs, prostitution, or had committed a sexual offense such as having an under-age girlfriend. A few had committed more violent crimes. Treatment coordinators chose them, referring those who showed an interest in the program and possibly might benefit from animal-

assisted activities. Some had a history of animal abuse, often in more institutionalized forms such as dog fighting. Almost all indicated that the pets they had lived with were “outside” dogs and cats, used more for protection or rodent control than companionship.

At the end of the three weeks, the dogs were returned to the shelter for adoption. At this time, we asked the students to write a letter to the potential adopter of the animals. These letters became our measurement of the success of the program. We include some excerpts and discuss a few instances that stood out as particularly memorable interventions.

Stuckers

Stuckers is a very loving dog. He will always sit by your side and is well trained. I think Stuckers once had a family, but they abandoned him and all he needs is some attention and love Whoever adopts Stuckers is very lucky to have such a well-behaved dog. I took very good care of Stuckers, and whoever adopts him, I hope will do the same.

All About Tonka

The first time I saw Tonka I immediately fell in love with her. I actually had to coax the others in the dog program to let me work with her. She has definitely been a challenge but her loving personality has made it all worth the while. When I first started working with Tonka, however, she did not know anything other than she wanted to be loved! At first she did not get along with the other dogs but that was just a matter of attention (You know how that is). Now she does not have any problems with other dogs I would recommend keeping Tonka inside while watering if your sprinkler heads mean anything to you.

Participants with some prior knowledge of pet keeping wrote the previous two letters. Mentioning the past experiences of the dogs let the young people place the animal in a familiar context they had heard about in counseling: Environment strongly affects behavior. These young adults were in various stages of understanding how they had landed in prison, and they could relate this to the dogs’ situations. The program also gave them an example of how behavior modification could “save” a life. This simple fact may

seem obvious to those of us with college educations, but it came as a revelation to 16-year-olds, particularly those with very little personal experience in receiving praise or emotional rewards.

One of the goals of the humane organization was to show these young people how companion animals function in our social worlds as emotional support for individuals and families. We hoped that teaching a training method that employed positive reinforcement would relay the need for kindness as opposed to force. Two young men who reported fighting dogs wrote the following two letters. For the young man who trained Nona, this was his first experience with a dog as a pet and companion.

Nona

Nona is very fun loving big hearted female dog that is looking for a home to love and be loved. . . . Nona is a very playful dog and loves it if you rubb [sic] her stomach and her chest. Nona just wants to be loved and if you have time to love this beautiful warm hearted animal, then Nona's the one for you.

Our most challenging participant wrote the final letter. On the first day, he described his past experiences with fighting dogs. Combative and resistant to the gentle methods of training we tried to teach him, he seldom openly praised his dog when she performed the correct behaviors. From five dogs, he chose Sidney, a crossbred Lab/Pit Bull. Not only was Sidney young and completely untrained, she exhibited some of the most challenging aspects of her breeds. She had a short attention span, a great deal of strength, and she was easily distracted. The young man was drawn to her because she was similar to dogs he had known, but her behavior conflicted with his previous experiences and the new methods we were trying to teach him. At several points during the three weeks, other students would take her from him when he seemed to be losing his temper. Once, he raised his hand to smack her, and a peer counselor took her.

Sydney's behavior obviously was not going to be modified in only three short weeks, and we grudgingly accepted that our efforts with this young man might not succeed - that is, until we received his letter.

Sydney

To who ever adopts my dog Sidnye [sic].

Well just a few things about my dog to let you know what to expect of her. My dog is six months old and she is still a puppy. She is a great dog and very loving and playful. I guess what I like about her is that she is beautiful and playful, but hard headed like me and that's what I like most about her. She will need a very caring owner to love and play with her . . . I have worked with Sidnye for about three weeks and to let her go with someone new knowing I won't ever see her again makes me feel sad cause I've really got attached to her. Please don't tie or cage this dog up cause she does not need to be in a cage like a wild dog does. She will probably get you mad at her the first few days you have her cause she don't know you. I can only tell you that you will love her cause she will love you. She need lots of love and phrasie [sic] Give her your hart [sic] and you will see what a great dog you have.

The day after the program ends, all the participants receive a certificate stating that they had completed all the requirements. This young man handed his back to the director, stating that he did not deserve it because he hadn't worked hard enough to help Sidney. Just as a three-week intervention did not "cure" Sidney, neither did it cure this young man. We hope that, in the future, one or both of them will apply the experience of positive reinforcement, rather than force, to solve a problem. This may seem overly optimistic to anyone not involved, but to gain these immediate, visible effects and to elicit such expressions of caring from these young people make our efforts to continue this program worthwhile. We also hope that, in the future, they will encourage more rigorous scientists to measure the success of these programs.

Note

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