

# A Nurturing Relationship: Youth and Dogs Connect in After-School Program

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Associate Editor

Sixteen graduates graced the stage of John Adams Middle School auditorium in Santa Monica on a recent Friday afternoon. Eight were students at the school and the other eight, homeless shelter dogs the students spent three weeks training to become adoptable.

All graduated from a character education program called K9 Connection, co-founded by Palisadians Katherine Beattie and Patricia Sinclair. A project of OPCC (formerly the Ocean Park Community Center), K9 Connection empowers at-risk youth to apply the lessons they teach the dogs—an awareness of the risks of uncontrolled and impulsive behavior, and the power of positive reinforcement—to their own lives.

"There's something about putting a dog and a kid together—you can access the kid," said Sinclair, who has a background in law, social work, state government and community service. Beattie is a former small business owner with a five-year background in humane education, which encompasses animal, environmental and human rights issues.

At the culminating ceremony, the young trainers proudly demonstrated their dogs' skills in a show on the auditorium stage. The canines were guided through a slalom course of orange pylons and then instructed to sit down before continuing through a nylon tunnel.

Each student communicated with his or her dog a little differently, having learned the animal's strengths and weaknesses in the previous three weeks of training. When 11-year-old Madison ran to the end of the nylon tunnel, "Riley" dashed through it to meet her at the other end. Ada, 12, tossed a few treats in the tunnel to guide "Ziggy" in.

For Dominique, teaching "Chip" to "come" was the most challeng-



K9 Connection graduate Matt, 11, with "Robby."

Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

ing part. A 3-1/2-month-old German shepherd mix, "Chip" was a special rescue dog whose family had been displaced after Hurricane Katrina. Following his K9 Connection graduation, "Chip" was to be reunited with his Louisiana family.

"This dog has special needs; he almost died," said Dominique, 12. Asked what "Chip" taught her, she said, "that instead of being in detention, I could be with my dog."

Other students learned patience, empathy, and persistence. Matt, 11, said he joined K9 Connection because he was looking to have some fun but ended up learning a lot from his dog, "Robby."

"Sometimes he doesn't listen, so I learned to never give up," Matt said. Sinclair and Beattie interviewed 50 students for eight spaces in the program at John Adams. They chose four boys and four girls

who "seemed to need the program and were really enthusiastic about it," Sinclair says. "These kids are at a fork in the road. This program is the tipping point for them."

The dogs selected for the program are "animals who need to be rescued but are also really sweet," Sinclair said. All but one had been adopted by graduation day.

The K9 Connection group meets for two hours a day, five days a week—first setting goals for themselves and their work with their dogs, and then putting their ideas into practice as they train the dogs in basic obedience, using positive reinforcement (as an alternative to force and violence).

Initially, the goal is "just hanging in there for three weeks," Sinclair said. The students work towards graduating from the program and helping the dogs secure

an adoptive family.

"I feel successful to complete a demanding program like K9 Connection," Madison said with "Riley" by her side. "We struggled on some things but we got through it."

Another student, Andrew, had chosen to participate in the program despite the fact that he had been bitten in the eye by a Siberian husky when he was 2. "I learned that people can learn stuff from animals," said Andrew, 12. "I used to be violent to people. I'm not like that anymore. I'm much nicer."

A former K9 Connection graduate, Mike, 13, returned to the program to help the students train the dogs. "I just liked it the first time," he said. "It was my first time ever having a dog to care about."

At the end of the graduation ceremony, the young trainers presented the dogs to their new owners—a proud and poignant moment reflected in tender exchanges between the students, dogs and their new families. The K9 Connection staff continues to meet monthly with each graduated class to continue goal-setting and update them on the status of their dogs.

K9 Connection is seeking foster homes for dogs during its programs, the next of which begins Monday, November 28, at Olympic High Continuation School. Foster families are provided with the cost of care during this four-week commitment.

Those interested can call 262-5424 or e-mail Glen Zipper, project operations manager, at zipper@k9connection.org. For more information, visit [www.k9connection.org](http://www.k9connection.org).



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