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"Life never becomes a habit to me. It's always a marvel."
- Katherine Mansfield

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blessed

The K9 Connection

Match a homeless shelter dog with an at-risk teen and what do you get?
A new chance for both.

by Ellen Michaud

Sprawled under a market umbrella in the piazza outside Starbucks in the California coastal town of Marina del Rey, Pinky, a 40-pound pink American Pit Bull Terrier, was unaware of all the attention she was attracting.

Instead, she was focused on the biscotti crumbs that had fallen on my sneaker. I chuckled as the huge muzzle wuffed my toes and the brain inside an equally huge head tried to figure out what was foot and what was crumb.

"This?" Yes.

"This?" Yes.

"This?" Oops. Maybe not. Mortified, she stopped nuzzling my shoelace and looked at it more carefully. It was an important lesson and I didn't rush her. Sneakers are expensive.

An older guy sitting at a nearby table watched for a moment, sipped his latte, then leaned forward to ask my son about the dog.

"That's a pit bull, isn't it?"

My son, a 29 year-old screenwriter who lives in the neighborhood, smiled. "Sure is."

The guy nodded. "I thought so." He flashed Pinky an admiring glance. "The pink glitter-collar kind of threw me off."

As my son began to talk about Pinky and her special place in the community, I thought about the collar. A lot of us think that pit bulls eat people for breakfast. But Pinky didn't get the memo. And for all her size and strength, a pink glitter-collar is an accurate reflection of who she is. Pinky is sweet. She's gentle. She's loving. She's steady as a rock. And, as a member of the K9 Connection, a Santa Monica-based program that matches homeless shelter dogs with at-risk teens, she's also one of the best teachers on the planet.

The K-9 Connection is a special organization, funded and supported by a variety of resources including the Santa Monica Police Department, Fox Studios, Creative Artists Agency, "Dog Whisperer" Cesar Millan, and film directors Martin Scorsese and Tony Scott. Founded two years ago as an offshoot of a Santa Monica community center, the non-profit group runs three-week sessions in which kids who have behavior issues or a history of running away, substance abuse, fighting, or gang activity, are each assigned a shelter dog.



The dogs, mostly mutts like Pinky who have been lost, abandoned or abused, usually need to learn social and obedience skills before they can be put up for adoption.

The kids learn how to train the dogs to control impulsive and inappropriate behavior with positive reinforcements—a lesson that will serve both dogs and kids as each works to build a new life.

The bond between child and dog is strong, and for kids who have been in trouble, it's sometimes the only connection they've been able to make in a long time. The hope among program volunteers like my son is that the kids will use that connection as a bridge to the rest of us.

Time will tell. In the meantime, Pinky is nuzzling biscotti here in the piazza. Having taught her kids a gentler way of life, she's waiting for someone to take her home.

Once dogs have graduated from the K9 Connection program, they can be adopted. If you would like to adopt Pinky or one of her friends, check out the program's website at www.K9connection.org, or contact Glen Zipper at info@K9connection.org.

To see Pinkie on YouTube.com, please [click here](#).

Award-winning author Ellen Michaud frequently writes about the everyday blessings we all tend to overlook. Share your stories with her at ellen@blackberrycottageproductions.com.

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