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SANTA MONICA

Youths help themselves by training homeless dogs

BY HELGA GENDELL

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With nurturing and guidance from the "k9 connection," ten at-risk students and the at-risk homeless dogs they trained proudly graduated Friday, October 12th, from their joint training program at Santa Monica Community Day School, located in the Police Activities League building, 1401 Olympic Blvd., Santa Monica.

The principal of the school, which has approximately 23 students in attendance, is Brian Burke, a newcomer to the school who has a solid background as a principal in two Sonoma County schools and as a longtime principal in Mendocino County at a Native American Indian school.

The students — from 12 to 18 years old — who attend this small continuation school are considered to be among the most vulnerable and at-risk students in Santa Monica and are facing a crucial point in their lives.

This program matches up homeless dogs from area rescue agencies faced with overcrowding, which are in need of obedience training to get them ready for permanent homes with at-risk youths who need assistance with uncontrolled and impulsive behavior, giving the students the opportunity to apply the lessons they teach the dogs to their own lives.

The k9 Connection is a project of OPCC (formerly the Ocean Park Community Center), co-founded by Katherine Beattie and Patricia Sinclair, and is entirely self-funded by community donations.

Beattie said the k9 Connection is always looking for volunteers and welcomes sponsorship opportunities to local businesses.

The project director is Glenn Zipper, and the project coordinator is Jessica Anisman.

Partnering with the school, k9 Connection volunteers assist the students in becoming responsible and focusing on setting goals, personal accountability and motivation by working with the students who have applied, interviewed and gained acceptance into the program.

In the classroom, the k9 Connection students work toward making their long-term goals a reality and they each set one short-term goal to attain during the program, as well as setting a specific goal for their work with the dogs.

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The volunteers for k9 Connection transport the dogs to the "host" school participating in the program, a certified dog trainer — Lynn Medlin of Correct-A-Pet who has 14 years of experience as a professional dog trainer — works with the students to train the dogs, with the goal of placing the dogs into permanent, loving homes, with a 100 percent adoption rate and a "no-kill" policy for all program dogs.

Classes are held over a three-week period, which began September 24th this year, meeting every weekday for two hours, including one hour in the field training the dogs and one hour in the classroom working on student goals and accountability.

During the program, the k9 Connection volunteers hold class and the students receive credit for attending, accompanied by their "student" dogs during the classroom portion of the program.

The students from this graduating class participated in several competitive events with their dogs, with some of the students demonstrating tricks they had taught their dogs.

The caring bond shared by the students and dogs was very visible, along with the pride the students exhibited at the graduation when their dogs performed well, knowing they were instrumental in the dogs' successes.

With the exception of dogs in the program that are already owned, the rest are available for adoption, according to k9 Connection.

The dogs that are available for adoption were provided by Bark Avenue Foundation, and the k9 Connection staff also volunteers to walk the dogs daily at the facility in downtown Los Angeles.

Bark Avenue Foundation takes in homeless dogs from a multitude of agencies that might have more dogs than they can care for, and it also provides daycare, boarding and grooming with local pickup and delivery service.

The class included Jaime Bravo and Winston, a two-to-three-year-old male Staffordshire/lab mix; Alfredo Castillo with Charlie; Crystal Castillo with Garbo, a seven-month-old lab mix who was adopted at the graduation; Vanessa Castillo with Elton, a five-six-year-old male Neapolitan mastiff;

Desmond Johnson and George, a three-to-four-year-old male poodle mix; Ralph Ramos and Bruce, three- and four-year-old male Dogues de Bordeaux (French mastiffs) (George and Bruce must be adopted together because they are best friends, according to staff); Javier Martinez and Ralphie (already owned); Teresa Woodward with Mason, an eight-month-old male Malinois/shepherd mix; and Angel Dudak and Rosie (already owned).

Another dog that participated and is available for adoption is Sunshine, an eight-month-old female boxer/lab/Staffordshire mix.

After exhibiting their individual dog's skills, each student gave a speech about how much the program has meant in their lives, what each one learned about themselves as they trained their dog, and how those lessons will be applied as they continue their studies at school.

Student Angel Dudak said Rosie is missing her right front leg, and she thought she would have to be more patient with Rosie because of her disability, but realized that her disability didn't hold her back.

Dudak says she is a diabetic, and working with Rosie and the k9 Connection has helped her take responsibility for her own health and to be responsible and motivated toward her school work and her life.

Teresa Woodward, who trained Mason, said that she and Mason have a lot in common, such as being stubborn and cocky and not listening, and that it took a long time to train Mason, but that it has helped her by teaching responsibility and punctuality.

Interested in becoming a registered nurse, Woodward said she looks up to people who have made a mark in the world and hopes one day to make her mark.

Desmond Johnson also related to his dog, George, saying they both get distracted and are stubborn. His interests lie in music, business and sociology, and he read a poem he had written, touching on the violence and despair he sees in California, but that he hopes for a better tomorrow.

Carol Tanner, one of the long-term volunteers, said, "I think that most of us hope to make a positive difference in this lifetime. If we can help at-risk teens to reach their academic and personal goals and, at the same time, obedience-train homeless dogs to increase their chances for adoption, then we have made a positive difference — and it feels darn good."

Beattie, Sinclair and Zipper all agree that they wouldn't be able to provide this program without the devoted assistance from their volunteers.

The graduation was well attended by family, friends and well-wishers of the students enthusiastically cheering them on.

Information about k9 Connection or about adopting these dogs, k9 Connection, (310) 264-5424, of www.k9connection.org/.

Information about Bark Avenue Foundation, Heidi Huebner, (213) 748-7485 or www.BarkAve LA.com/.

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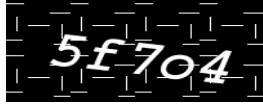
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