



Photo courtesy Jonathon Freidman

Canine rescue also lends solace to troubled youth

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Living Assistant

Can an animal rescue group reshape the lives of at-risk teens?

K9 Connection, based in Santa Monica, is a non-profit organization that teaches troubled youth about responsibility, goal setting and discipline, through a four-week dog training and in-classroom program.

"People think we're just an animal rescue group, but I tell them we are a child rescue group that saves dogs," said project director of K9 Connection, Glen Zipper.

The students attend obedience training with their assigned dog and try to teach the animal basic behavioral skills and, in turn, gain a sense of responsibility and discipline themselves. Upon conclusion of the program, students celebrate at a graduation ceremony while the dogs are adopted.

"We have a 100 percent dog adoption placement rate. No dog in our care has ever been euthanized," said Zipper.

K9 Connection serves three high schools and one middle school in the Santa Monica area and focuses on struggling teens who need additional attention to enroll in the program. "Some kids simply can not succeed in the over-populated schools in our area," said Zipper.

One K9 Connection graduate, Justin Freidman, was having difficulty focusing at Santa Monica High School, yet found success at the non-profit from the moment he turned in his application.

"We ask students who their hero is and often get answers like Britney Spears and P. Diddy, but Justin answered Leonardo Da Vinci," Zipper said. "We knew instantly that we had to meet this kid."

"I thought [K9 Connection] was going to be nothing more than a quick 10 elective credits. I was way wrong," Freidman said. "Immediately, I knew that something much more was being created. I took the class and became well-known for my dedication and interest for the topics we would talk about."

With a little individual attention, Freidman improved, worked with a difficult dog and was one of the program's brightest students, according to Zipper.

"The program works because it overlays the fun and joy of working, training and doing tricks with dogs, with the responsibility of taking control of your life... It did wonders for me and I'm sure it has greatly affected some other young students too," Freidman said.

Freidman is interning with K9 Connection and is studying at Linn's School of Dog Psychology.

"I am attending Santa Monica College and am studying business, so I might have my own dog training and rehabilitation center in the future," Freidman said.

There are two ways Pepperdine students can volunteer their time at K9 Connection: by assisting in the classroom and dog training sessions, or by serving as an adoption volunteer.

General support volunteers help during class from 10 to noon, three days a week.

"We need the volunteers to be committed to this schedule so that the students remember who they are and can trust them," Zipper said.

During class, volunteers help students facilitate the knowledge they learn during dog training and work on goals, obstacles and progress, according to Zipper.

Adoption volunteers take dogs that are ready for adoption on short walks around Santa Monica. The dogs wear vests that display "adopt me" and can be walked whenever the volunteer is available.

"This is our most popular volunteer position and can be as simple as walking dogs twice a month," Zipper said.

Alumni Amanda Spooner, 2007 graduate of the Pepperdine Graduate School of Education and Psychology, volunteered with K9 Connection while earning her degree.

"I think that it is a perfect place for people to volunteer who have a variety of interests," Spooner said. "I am very invested in animal welfare and I am also pursuing my education in psychology. This program gave me a chance to work with a population I have never worked with before and also allowed me to be involved with working with shelter dogs."

The program is effective because it presents a win-win situation for both the dogs and at-risk youths, according to Spooner.

"The kids gain life-long skills in goal setting, as well as an increased sense of self-esteem, and the dogs find wonderful, loving homes in the process," Spooner said.

Spooner sees the non-profit as a solid institution that will only get stronger over time. "Animal therapy is still a burgeoning field that can go in many different directions, and it is nice to see an effective application of it that will hopefully extend to more projects to come," Spooner said.

Anyone interested in volunteering with K9 Connection can visit their Web site at www.k9connection.org for further information on the various volunteer positions available. The main office can be reached at (310)-264-5424 and is located at 1453 16th Street in Santa Monica.

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