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THE PET GAZETTE

promoting animal wellness, awareness & rescue

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PETS IN THE NEWS : PAWS Up!

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K9 Connection

By Katherine Beattie
Aug 17, 2005, 01:20

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Paws Up! to the K9 Connection, a program where shelter dogs and at-risk teens learn to trust each other and “learn the connection.”

K9 Connection pairs at-risk youth with homeless shelter dogs in a three-week after school program that meets Monday through Friday for two hours. The first hour starts in the classroom, with dogs lying nearby, and teaches the students useable life skills like setting attainable goals and developing their empathy – skills that will be used in the field when training the dogs.

Goal setting starts with identifying dreams, an illusive idea to many who attend K9 Connection. It is easier for them to imagine a better life for their shelter dogs, and often training and placing the dogs in a permanent home becomes a student's first tangible goal.



The second half of each session puts the classroom ideas into practice as students learn to train the shelter dogs in basic obedience with positive reinforcement. The training helps the homeless dogs become more adoptable. When the dogs provide instant feedback to their trainers, the students develop the ability to read nonverbal cues and learn behavior cause and effect, while they focus and work through frustration. “Training travels both ways on a leash in our classes,” explains Doyle smiling.

“It's a win/win situation with kids and dogs anyway,” she continues, “but these kids and these dogs have a lot in common. They have both experienced the less ‘humane’ side of society. They share the same feelings of abandonment, rejection and neglect. Their instant recognition of each other's vulnerability increases the benefit from being together. The

mutual need of both the kids and dogs for an exchange of trust, consistency and unconditional dedication is something that blossoms more each day as it is met in each other. Both get more open, playful and loving as the trust between them grows like a safety net, allowing them to step out on the emotional edge of where they've been hiding."

The dogs, recruited from city animal shelters, live with foster families during the three-week program. Previously, they lived at the shelter during the sessions, but the stress of shelter life proved detrimental to their progress. Foster families are provided with the cost of care and help socialize the dogs.

The K9 Connection programs are offered in public schools and group homes. At the completion of the course, the student trainer presents his dog at a graduation ceremony and the dog meets its new owner. Occasionally there are tears, but mostly there is pride at having secured a loving, 'forever' family for their dog. One big goal accomplished.

For the K9 Connection staff, the program continues with monthly sessions and the staff meets with each graduated class to continue goal setting and update them on the status of their dogs. "We stay in touch with the students and the dogs," Doyle said. "Everyone learns to care about each other through the program. That is something that should be nourished. There has been enough abandonment in everyone's lives without us leaving too."

To learn more about K9 Connection, visit them at www.k9connection.org or call 310-264-5424.

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