

# Lessons in LOVE

K9 Connection brings at-risk teens together with abandoned dogs—and lets them learn from each other.

BY MARTIN BOOE

What happens when you take dogs facing euthanasia and add at-risk kids facing expulsion from school, or worse? Miracles, judging from the results generated by K9 Connection in Santa Monica, CA, which pairs troubled youths with disturbed canines for three-week stints. The kids learn dog-training techniques from qualified trainers, and the dogs learn how to behave, improving their chances for adoption.

“There’s a magic to it,” says Pat Sinclair, the program’s co-founder. “These are two populations that understand each other. The dogs have been in jail. They’ve been abused and neglected, and they have abandonment issues. The kids come from similar places. A lot of them have been in juvenile hall, and they really want to help.”

The benefit for the animals is obvious. The majority find homes after participating in the three-week, two-hour-a-day regimen, which smooths their rough edges and makes them fit for polite company. What the kids get

in return is maybe a little harder to measure in conventional terms. The key word is, indeed, *connection*. The kids learn from professional dog trainers and then go on to train the dogs they have chosen to partner with. Timid kids can find confidence handling pit bulls, and big, tough kids can show their tender side working with small, nervous animals.

Many who participate in the training course stay on as peer advisers for a year or more. The teens bond with the dogs, and also with each other. And



Bryant Boyd-Martinez (left) and David Villacenor of K9 Connection with a pair of rescue pit bulls.

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so, on a recent sunny California morning at the Ocean Park Community Center, a dozen graduates of the program, all clad in K9 CONNECTION T-shirts, have gathered for a “check-in.” As they await the session’s guest speaker, Ilusion Millan, who’s on K9 Connection’s advisory board, two pit bulls utter the low whimpers of canines who are feeling the love.

It doesn’t take long for the rough odds some of the kids are up against to reveal themselves, and what’s most touching is the matter-of-fact way that

and the family went together to the graveyard—and he also won \$200 in a skateboard competition.

Originally, the program brought in eight shelter dogs to be trained by as many teens, but the Dog Whisperer himself, Cesar Millan, who keeps a watchful eye on the K9 clan, decided that it would be better to balance the pack by combining four shelter dogs with four dogs that were already trained.

Some of the shelter dogs seem out of control on arrival, so Cesar has had to administer a dose of tough love on more than one occasion. Eighteen-year-old Max Morrison, for example, was paired with a shepherd-Jindo mix named Dolly, “a grouchy little dog who was aggressive,” he says. “Then Cesar came along and set her straight. He laid hands on her, and she really settled down.”

Desmond Johnson, 19, was set to enter the program three years ago, but he got “locked up for four months” before the course began. Now he’s one of the program’s success stories. He returned to school, rejoined K9, and became one of its first interns. Now he’s in college studying music and is still a presence at K9 as a peer guide. “The dogs showed me you can be friendly to anyone,” he says. “You’ve got to stick through the tough times.” Like all the participants, he breaks into a big smile when talking about his training dog, a poodle named George whose best friend was a pit bull named Bruce. “I thought I was alone, but K9 showed me I had support and taught me to ask for help. It also taught me that the worst person you can steal from is yourself.”

“When they come into K9, we ask the kids, ‘What’s your dream?’ says Sinclair. “They don’t know for themselves, but they do know for the dogs. It’s all about positive reinforcement, and I think what means the most to them are what I like to call ‘sparkling moments,’ flashes of optimism that they can revisit when things get tough.” ●

harrowing situations are presented. “My mom’s in prison, but I came out with a 4.25 grade point average this semester,” says one young man. “I’m turning my life around, and I’m doing it for her.” Another, Jonathan, reports getting A’s and B’s even though his mom died in October. Oh, and there was the random bullet that whizzed by his head on Thanksgiving, narrowly missing him and shattering a window behind him. “I’m grateful,” he says in a low voice. Another, Maximilian, “made a mistake.” He omits the details, but it was enough to get him sentenced to nine months in juvenile hall. Another, however, reports a peaceful Thanksgiving. His recently deceased grandfather’s gravestone arrived,

The kids in the program put dogs through their paces.



## Ilusion shares her passion...

I discovered K9 Connection about three years ago, and as soon as I did I fell in love with the program and what they’re doing in the lives of the kids who participate. Right then I decided I wanted to be a part of it—not just by supporting the group financially but by becoming personally involved.

I get such joy out of visiting with the teens who are taking part in the program, listening to their stories, and sharing some of my own. But you know what means the most? Seeing the look of pride and accomplishment in their faces—because many of these kids have never been shown much love, and they are certainly not used to being praised for a job well done.

When they talk in the group and share their experiences, the stories touch my heart, touch it in a very real way. I know so well the life they come from. I grew up in the same tough environment. I knew too many kids who dropped out of high school, or started using drugs, or got in trouble with the police for boosting cars. I knew too many girls who got pregnant way too early and too many boys lured by the gang life.

Me, I was lucky enough to find some hope along the way—and that is what I want to share with them.

Working with the dogs in the program gives these kids a sense of responsibility, and it’s something they respond to. And perhaps the bond they build with the animals helps them drop the hard shell they use to protect themselves from the world and makes them more receptive to a positive message.

I tell them that we have to start by sharing our fears and anxieties and challenges and then understanding the choices we’ve made. It’s about seeing these bad choices not as mistakes but rather as lessons learned. Next we have to look at how to make good choices.

Visiting the kids at K9 Connection brings together so many of the passions of my life. Yes, I am a successful businesswoman, but first I am a mother, a wife, and an educator. I have been blessed with so much, and it is a blessing to be able to give back through our foundation and by getting personally involved.



Ilusion meets regularly with the kids in the K9 Connection program and shares her own story with them.

TO LEARN MORE  
 about K9 Connection and how you can  
 help, go to [k9connection.org](http://k9connection.org).