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Prisons Give Unruly Rescue Dogs a Second Chance

Programs Match Abandoned, Abused Dogs With Offenders for Obedience Training

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By JOEL MILLMAN [CONNECT](#)

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In a women's prison in Gig Harbor, Wash., unwanted dogs are trained by inmates as part of a pet partnership program. The project saves dogs like Pax from death row and teaches prisoners valuable life lessons.

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GIG HARBOR, Wash.— The penitentiary here holds more souls than it was ever designed for. Some of the residents are loud and "mouthy," needing lots of one-on-one attention; a few just can't keep still.

Others just want a good tummy rub.

Home to female offenders, including murderers, Gig Harbor is one of several prisons across the country that welcome dogs with a bad rap.

The Washington Corrections Center for Women here pioneered the concept of matching abandoned, abused and neglected dogs with offenders, many of whom come from backgrounds almost as dire.

Launched in 1981, the program has blossomed into a plethora of nonprofits bearing names like Colorado Cell Dogs, Death Row Dogs and New Leash on Life—all of which rescue dogs from crowded shelters. From there, they get straightened out by prisoners.

With repetition, rehabilitation blooms into skill sets a dog can really be proud of. From fetching tennis balls con-canines learn to pick up house keys for the wheelchair bound. Starting with leash-tugging exercises, a dog may learn to help fallen humans to their feet.

Offenders here earn their way into the dog program by remaining infraction-free during their incarceration. They also earn \$1.41 an hour—a good wage in an institution where kitchen jobs or swinging a mop pays less than a third of that.

"This is what gets me through," says Alvinita Stuart, a convicted murderer whose sentence ends in 2016.

Some also get the benefit of canine therapy, learning to talk out their problems with a psychologist while stroking a well-mannered pooch at their sides.

Ms. Stuart, 49, says she becomes "synchronized" with each dog in her care.

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"One taught me how to control myself," she says. "I learned I had to be fair. I couldn't be inconsistent."

She says the best part is having a dog to take back to her unit each night. Recently, she was paired with Zuma, a Lab-Pit Bull mix, whom she is training to be a service dog.

At Gig Harbor, the dogs, just like the inmates, are given the chance to redeem themselves.



Pax

Take Pax. An exuberant Golden Retriever, he flunked out of a Wisconsin prison program after being branded as incorrigible. Former corrections officer Teresa Crutchfield remembers the day last year when Pax first loped into her unit at Gig Harbor. "He'd grab everything with his mouth and wouldn't let go," she recalls.

But after being matched with a convicted murderer, Pax got care and attention around the clock. He graduated at the top of his class five months ago and is out of the disciplinary doghouse. A Catholic nun, Sister Pauline Quinn, hired Pax to replace her retiring Doberman as "spokes-dog" for her Bridges and Pathways of Courage program, which pairs problem pooches with the convicts who train them.

Dogs with exceptional aptitude like Pax can graduate to become service dogs for the disabled. Some are companions to elderly shut-ins, while others aid children with autism. A few find work within prison walls, sniffing out contraband narcotics.

Two Gig Harbor alumni have more exotic assignments. They now work for the University of Washington's Conservation Canines—a corps of high-energy dogs who enjoy nothing more than bounding through the wilderness sniffing for the droppings of endangered species.

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Sister Pauline Quinn at the Washington Corrections Center for Women with Golden Retriever Pax. Stuart Isett for The Wall Street Journal

This joint also takes in "civilians"—pets from nearby households whose owners prefer placing them in a prison rather than the confinement of a traditional kennel.

Gig Harbor's commercial unit lets locals lodge dogs for \$19 a day, cheaper than at any private kennel nearby. For a fee of \$25 to \$80 per dog, the facility offers spa services, too: a bath, blowout, nail grooming and even a specialty cut. Grooming clerk Amanda Shockey, 45, says owners request special puffball styles (for their poodles), or sometimes a "faux hawk"—a fake mohawk to crown the head.

"Having the exposure to the animals gives you a connectivity you wouldn't have," says Ms. Shockey, a convicted murderer who won't be eligible for release for nearly two more decades. "Seeing them get a second chance and being part of that second chance gives me greater hope for my future as well as theirs."

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Retired educator Don Weitz of nearby Fox Island, Wash., recently dropped off three-year old Arrow, a Greyhound, for his latest stay. "The first time he came he was so whiny, from the separation and all," recalls Mr. Weitz. "We heard he stayed with an offender, which calmed him down."

He says both dog and master like that Arrow shacks up with a human, instead of being left alone in a cage. "They treat him so well," he says. "Plus we know he'll never escape."

At some prisons, offenders even train dogs for local pet owners. The Friends for Folks program at the Lexington Correctional Center south of Oklahoma City takes in civilians' dogs for remedial courses.

"The owner brings the dog, brings the dog food. It's basic obedience but we might offer a little extra. Like trick training, or Frisbee dog," program coordinator Lee Fairchild explains. "Let's say they chase a cat. We get them out of that."

The program, which accepts donations, has a two-year waiting list. Most people give \$100 for a month of training.

But bargains aren't all that bind prison programs to their communities. It's the bridges that form between two worlds that rarely merge.

"The minute we get to the parking lot at the prison, he knows where we are," says John Sharp, a construction manager who is owner of a Shih Tzu named Baxter. "He typically spends all his time with the inmates."

"Baxter is very high maintenance," says Yolanda Pouncey, a convicted burglar who isn't due to be released until 2026. The 39-year-old cuddles Baxter in her sleep, wrapping strong tattooed arms around her tiny charge.

The inmate brushes back a tear as she explains how she feels having a dog that adores her, too.

"They're so loving, so understanding," she says. "There are days when I come in all down on myself. But the minute that dog looks up and smiles at me, it just takes that all away."

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