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Rehabilitating offenders and canines at Larch Corrections Center

New Humane Society for Southwest Washington program provides training and socialization for dogs

By [Dawn Feldhaus](#) | December 15, 2016 5:30 am | [comments](#)



Darion Chambers (left) and Christopher Baker (right), residents at Larch Corrections Center, have been teaching Rickey, a 3-year-old chihuahua-terrier mix, various commands such as sit and stay. "We create bonds with them," Baker said. He would consider becoming a dog trainer after he is released from Larch.

([Dawn Feldhaus](#)/Post-Record)

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Participants in the pet training camp at Larch Corrections Center help prepare dogs for adoption. Larch and the Humane Society for Southwest Washington have formed a partnership, that involves some Larch residents living with the dogs 24-7. Larch Superintendent Lisa Oliver-Estes said the pet training camp teaches residents responsibility, and they receive unconditional love and form bonds while giving back to the community.

(Dawn Feldhaus/Post-Record)

Ten residents at Larch Corrections Center, in Yacolt, are participating in the second installment of a pet training camp for the Humane Society for Southwest Washington dog adoption program. The first training sessions occurred from August to October, and the second sessions started in mid-November.

Isaiah White helped train Simba, and now he is working with Abner.

White, 29, is a former Portland and Vancouver resident who was arrested for delivery of a controlled substance.

His room at Larch includes a cork board with a picture of Simba, alongside photos of White's family members.

Simba graduated from the eight-week training program and has since been adopted through the Humane Society.

"The dogs are teaching me patience," White said.

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After he is released from Larch, he hopes to get a union job.

White said the skills he has learned through the dog training program could lead him to also work at a pet day care business.

“When Abner first got here, he would curl up in a ball and sleep,” he said. “Now, he explores and is more open. He has come out of his shell.”

The dogs live with the trainers 24-7, at Larch, an all-male, minimum security facility that has the capacity to house 480 offenders.

Larch also has a pet training camp for cats, with felines provided by the HSSW, of Vancouver, and the West Columbia Gorge Humane Society, of Washougal.

Tammi Olund, a marketing consultant for the HSSW, said the pet training camp was created so that cats and dogs, along with offenders, have second chances. For the first and second sessions of the camp, HSSW identified five dogs in the shelter that needed help with basic manners.

Each dog is paired with two offender dog handlers who provide training and socialization opportunities.

Trainers from the Humane Society educate the Larch participants on dog handling skills. Several of the handlers read books about dog training and behavior.

Before the dogs graduate, they are leash trained and they know basic commands.

“The dogs grow to love and trust their handlers unconditionally,” Larch Superintendent Lisa Oliver-Estes said. “This is sometimes the first time these men have ever felt that type of connection.”

The offenders at Larch are all within four years of release.

In order to participate in the pet training camp, the potential handlers go through a pre-screening process.

“After the application is received, I go through the sentence and disciplinary records to see if they qualify,” said Cheryl Leon Guerrero, a classification counselor 2 at Larch.

She is supervisor of the dog program and the individual participants.

“Once I have qualified the individual, they are placed on a list and they get an interview with the trainers from the Humane society and myself,” Leon Guerrero said. “At that time it is discussed as to whether they are a fit for the program or not and put on the rotation list for the program.”

Bryan Silva, 42, of Longview, said he was involved in drugs when he was arrested for residential burglary and eluding police.

He has already assisted with the cat program at Larch.

“Dogs are a lot more work and rewarding,” Silva said. “The dogs are a handful.”

He is training Trax, a 1-year-old pointer-whippet mix, to stop nipping at ankles and arms.

“I can make a difference here,” Silva said, regarding his participation in the pet training camp.

“I have learned lots of patience and consistency,” he added.

During Silva’s two years at Larch, he has taken small business classes offered by Clark College. He has also graduated from an automotive repair program.

Silva’s roommate, Shawn Schulze, 33, said Trax had behavior issues but now relaxes with Kong chew toys filled with food.

“He uses his mind to exhaust himself,” Schulze said.

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Trax, a survivor of the Louisiana floods in August, is figuring out how to play.

“I enjoy spending time and energy with something that does not judge,” Schulze said.

He had been arrested for identity theft in Snohomish County. Schulze grew up with dogs, including Lily, a Pomeranian/poodle mix.

She died while Schulze, a former Seattle resident, was in Snohomish County Jail.

Darion Chambers, 25, trained Porter, during the first session of the pet training camp.

Now, he is helping Rickey, a 3-year-old chihuahua-terrier mix.

“I have often had dogs in my life, but I did not know the proper way to train them,” Chambers said.

He was arrested for second-degree assault, after being involved in a gang-related shooting in Tacoma.

Chambers recently gave a talk about the difference between dominance and leadership at a Toastmasters International meeting at Larch.

He described the pet training camp as therapy for the dogs and the handlers.

“We work on ourselves,” Chambers said. “We show the dogs, patience and understanding.”