

# pet connection

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# Freedom Tails:

## Second Chances, Compassion, and Connections Behind Bars



He'd only walk a few feet and then fall down. But then his ears started to stand up; we think he must've lived in a very confined space before he came to us. From the start, we could see that there was

**A**berdeen, Washington, is nestled at the mouth of two rivers and is locally known as the "Gateway to the Olympic Peninsula." Located 109 miles west of Seattle, the tiny town is also the heart of a thriving program that provides second chances for rescue dogs and prison inmates at Stafford Creek Corrections Center (SCCC).

In 2009, this state-run men's prison took a chance on a pilot program called "Freedom Tails," which partnered dogs with inmates for their mutual benefit. In the eight years since its birth, Freedom Tails has transformed the lives of hundreds of inmates and shelter dogs who were facing euthanasia, teaching the former about responsibility, empathy, and caring for another living being, and helping the latter learn what it means to be part of a family. Freedom Tails has been so successful that every prison in the state has a similar program now – and to date, the program has helped 342 dogs find forever families.

The all-volunteer organization Harbor Association of Volunteers for Animals (HAVA), based out of Raymond, oversees the placement of dogs who graduate from the program, and dog trainer and Correctional Sergeant Patricia (Pattie) McCarty volunteers her time to train dogs and guide inmates with dog training practices. Dogs selected for the program live with the inmates 24/7 for a 10-week training period where they learn basic obedience and life skills, typically graduating after the 10 weeks.

The shelter is always Pattie's first stop to find suitable canine candidates. "We're looking for good

family dogs – we want to see how they act around cats and children," she explained. "I have a ranch, so we also test them on horses, goats, and chickens."

Pattie, who trains basic obedience using American Kennel Club (AKC) methods, has trained dogs for 45 years. "I wanted the dogs to be well mannered and well socialized," she explained. "They receive a general assessment and I usually have them for about a week. We determine if they're hyper, gentle, fearful, or if they spook easily. I try to match the dog with the inmate."

"We've had so many dogs come through the program who would've been euthanized otherwise," Pattie said. "There was a Labrador mix who was completely deaf and blind in one eye. She had to learn all hand signals. I heard back from her family about two months ago and she's doing very well!"

The program has also profoundly impacted the lives of the inmates. "One of my favorite stories is an inmate who was incarcerated since he was a young man. He had a year and a day to go, then he got wrapped up in the prison life," Pattie recalled. "Now he's sentenced to life without parole. He was in the intensive management unit (IMU). Normal housing units have two inmates to a cell, but he couldn't be in a cell with another inmate. He spent many years there, and never thought he'd come out and live in the general population."

**But this program changed everything for him.**

"The human compassion he'd bottled up his entire life...it came out with the first dog he was matched with. He cried when he had to give up the leash to this dog, but he couldn't help save the next dog if he didn't. He has been in the program for a few years

now and hasn't gotten into any trouble. He's said he can't imagine his life without the dogs. I never would've guessed that he'd come around like this."

Freedom Tails provides the inmates with the opportunity to learn the empathy that they may have never experienced in their lives.

"They can see the immediate positive result of their positive actions," shared Karen Diehm, volunteer photographer and public relations for Freedom Tails. "This feels good and leads to more positive actions, and the drive to seek out more positive ways to interact with the world around them. Some of these guys have never experienced the unconditional love a dog can give."

Karen creates a newsletter for the inmates, sharing stories about the dogs who have graduated and they're doing with their families. She wants the men that helped train the dogs to be able to enjoy the results of their hard work. One graduate just won several AKC titles!

During the training process, the dogs learn hand signals for sit, forward, reverse, down, and stay. "If you're in a crowded room and your dog can't hear you, you can still communicate with them," Pattie explained. "One woman who adopted a dog saw that we were using signs with him. She started crying and said, 'My daughter is deaf and she uses sign language.'"

Freedom Tails is a popular program at SCCC. "The inmates want to participate in Freedom Tails because they love the dogs and want to give something back to the community," Pattie said. "I get to see the changes in the inmates and in the dogs. These inmates will someday be a part of our communities and I'd like to know that they've learned human compassion here. It's so worth it to connect with those we can reach out and touch."

One of the dogs, a German shepherd named Dodger, was adopted out in July, but he was in rough shape when he came in. "We can only guess at what he went through," Pattie said. "When he arrived, he didn't have that life in his eyes. His ears couldn't stand up. We assumed he'd always be that way."

a sweet dog in there, and the gal who adopted him just loves him."

"While we don't know what he'd gone through before he was rescued, it was obvious that he'd need a firm and loving owner, and for us, it was love at first sight!" added Nicole W. Dodger's adopter. "He's very high-energy now that he's healthy, and a perfect playmate for my energetic nine-month-old pit bull/boxer mix, Ellie. This is a huge relief for Mocca, my 11-year-old Dachshund/Pekingese mix, who would rather snooze on the couch!"

"The adopters make this all possible," said Pattie. "If it weren't for them, we wouldn't be a success. They open their homes and hearts to these animals and provide forever homes."

Adopters Jeff and Katy T. couldn't be happier with their newest family member. "Our wonderful dog Snickers had recently passed away, and we were ready to bring another dog into the family," Jeff said.

"We'd been looking all over the state and applied for several dogs, but had yet to be approved. When we saw Callie's little face, we fell in love and immediately filled out an application. And then our application was approved the next day for a dog from a rescue in Seattle, too! We adopted both dogs, and now Callie and Macie are best friends," Katy enthused.

Programs like this aren't possible without community support – and the outpouring has been nothing short of inspirational. From the local seamstress who donates handmade beds for every dog, and the Warm Co. who donates the matting, to local pet supply stores who donate items for the adopter gift bags, people love and want to support what this program does. When the family-owned pet food company, NutriSource Pet Foods, learned about Freedom Tails, they immediately committed to providing all of the dogs' food. NutriSource is proud to support programs like Freedom Tails – thanks in part to the donation of their food, it continues to impact dogs and the people who love them.



To learn more about Freedom Tails visit [hava-heart.org/freedom-tails](http://hava-heart.org/freedom-tails)

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