



Why locals are taking their pets to this Gig Harbor prison

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Behind the razor wire and tall fences of the Washington State Correction Center for Women in Gig Harbor, 740 women are serving time. But, a lucky few have found an escape from the despair of prison life by making a difference.

"It's like a world outside of the world we live in here," said Heather, an inmate serving 22 years. "You kind of mentally step back from this place. It's like a community here."

Heather is one of 19 inmates in a program called Prison Pet Partnership. Inmates train service dogs, help homeless pets and provide boarding and grooming services to the public, gaining self esteem and life skills in the process.

"I have great caring skills and can care of someone's dog and cat, and know they are going to be safe in my care," continued Heather.

Marriam, also an inmate, is training Billie to be a service dog.

"It doesn't feel like a job," she said. "I honestly don't even consider it work."

<http://seattlerefined.com/lifestyle/prison-pet-partnership>



An inmate during a show dog grooming class as part of the Prison Pet Partnership at the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor. (Sy Bean / Seattle Refined)

Heather and Marriam were both just young teenagers when they were convicted for their roles in a deadly murder-for-hire plot. That was 16 years ago. The program has given

them hope for a brighter future.

"I'm hoping once I leave the facility, I can continue being a dog trainer," said Marriam. "Hopefully in the future, I can move into the groom room and learn how to groom dogs as well so I can also have that under my belt to go into the pet care industry."

"I'm learning team work," continued Heather. "There are a lot of personalities, and we are learning to deal with them and communicate with different people. Some communication doesn't work with some others, so it's differentiating that and I'm also learning a really good work ethic."

"For the majority, the women are going to release and live in your community or my community," explained Beth Rivard, Executive Director, Prison Pet Partnership. "We have very few women, in fact very few people in any institution in the state of Washington, that are going to be incarcerated forever. So, it's so important people have job skills, have a focus, have something to do when they get out so they're not re-offending."

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Inmates like Marriam are with their future service animals all day, every day, even in their cells, teaching basic obedience and skills these dogs will need to help their future owners with disabilities. Marriam cherishes every moment, even though she'll eventually have to give Billie away to a new owner in need.

"Dogs are just so sweet," explained Marriam. "They are so in tune with your emotion. They don't care. They don't judge. They're so forgiving. They're consistent, they're fun. I mean, they're just the best companion."

"The women put so much into these dogs and then to watch them give that dog away is phenomenal to watch," said Beth. "We're all crying and it reminds us why we do this."

From start to finish, it takes dedication to be part of this program, and there's a waiting list over a year long to get in.



Inmates sit in a show dog grooming class as part of the Prison Pet Partnership at the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor. (Sy Bean / Seattle Refined)

"They have to stay out of trouble," said Beth. "So, they have to maintain good behavior before they work here and while they work here. They have to take an initial pet care class and pass a test with an 85% or higher in order to be on the waiting list to be employed here. It's pretty rigorous to get here, and to stay here."

Both Heather and Marriam hope the love and compassion they show these animals will prove to the community they've changed.

"It helps us give back to the community by taking care of people's animals," said Heather. "And, we're watching their kids. So, we're a great babysitter."

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"We really take our job very seriously, continued Marriam. "Not only that, but us being offenders and being in prison, we also have more to prove to the outside community that we can take care of their dogs, they can trust us."

For more information about Prison Pet Partnership, click [here](#).



Mirriam Oliver, who also received a 22 year sentence at the age of 14, holds her boarded cat that sleeps in her cell as part of the Prison Pet Partnership at the Washington Corrections Center for Women Gig Harbor. (Sy Bean / Seattle Refined)