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Washington state was the first to give pets to prisoners. Now an inmate at Cedar Creek Corrections Center is training canines to serve veterans—and turning around his own life.

THE TRUTH ABOUT CONS AND DOGS

BY **ALLISON WILLIAMS**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MIKE KANE**

Aiden was born under an abandoned trailer on the Lummi Nation reservation in 2011. The mottled brown mutt was part of a feral dog pack that roams the reservation west of Bellingham, living off the spoils of overturned trash cans and handouts from residents. Aiden bit the first human who touched him.

Now Aiden's in prison.

So is Larry Gregory Jr., a short and muscular 47-year-old who wears khaki pants and a cherry-red T-shirt, the official uniform of Cedar Creek Corrections Center 21 miles southwest of Olympia. Gregory has deliberate, calm movements, especially around the dogs that share his prison.

Gregory never bit anyone, but in his youth he stole, resisted arrest, and did drugs. Aiden's been in prison eight months; Gregory has been behind bars for more than 10 years.

Both are star students in the Department of Corrections animal training program, a section of the statewide Sustainability in Prisons Project. In the women's prison in Gig Harbor, locals can board their pets with inmates; at Monroe Correctional Complex prisoners socialize kittens to keep them from overcrowded shelters. The Coyote Ridge offenders turn euthanasia-bound pound dogs into adoptable family pets. The menageries are a Washington success story, says assistant secretary of prisons Dan Pacholke, and free to the prisons. In the Cedar Creek version, the idea is simple: Service dog training requires constant, patient instruction; prison inmates have nothing but time.

Dog classes take place in the Cedar Creek visiting room, decorated with cartoon murals meant to soften the harsh reality of the prison for the children who visit their incarcerated fathers in this space. Besides Aiden, six dogs—all purebred collies, poodles, and retrievers—participate in the program. The inmates answer to Denise Costanten, a Bellingham trainer who founded Brigadoon Service Dogs and two years ago proposed this program. She drives 350 miles every week, on her own dime, to teach the inmates.

As she instructs them on how dogs should open bathroom doors, some canines sit still. One collie poops all over the floor. Aiden lolls on his back, legs bent, exposing his belly and working his jaw in the universal dog language of "You're just sitting there, so you might as well scratch me."

For the inmate trainers it's paying work that earns them 42 cents per hour, about what they'd make as a prison janitor. The job is more coveted than tending the prison garden or working on a road crew. Dog program participants are not allowed to rack up infractions of any kind, from minor (untidy rooms or beds) to serious (gambling, tattooing), least of all major transgressions like fighting. They get two-man rooms rather than bunks in the open dorms and the freedom to exit the housing

units at night—a dubious prize when it's spitting cold rain at 3am and their dogs can't decide whether they really want to do their business after all.

"Corrections has always been a big stick, and this is a big carrot," says Paris Albertsen, the Cedar Creek counselor who oversees the program and is its lead champion. Tall and imposing—the trimmed gray goatee and curled black earring help—he lobbied for two years to install a dog run, complete with gazebo, inside the prison.

Service dogs, which support people with disabilities ranging from sight impairment to mental illness, must learn to respond to up to 90 cues. They open doors, turn on lights, and pull off socks. They must navigate for their owners while ignoring squirrels or small children or the smell of another dog's butt. Though Costanten's Brigadoon outfit trains service and companion dogs of all stripes, most that do stints at Cedar Creek are headed to military veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 11 to 20 percent of service

members who did wartime tours in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD. Service dogs help sufferers refocus their anxieties, break cycles of stress, and interact socially, but a single service dog represents an investment of up to \$30,000 and hundreds of hours of training time. Costanten employs only one part-time trainer in her own business, but thanks to the inmate instructors she expects to place 14 dogs in 2014.

The logistics of putting dogs in prison aren't minor. A sign in the Perimeter Control Office reads "Security Is Never Convenient," and neither are the needs of an excitable canine. Staff had to work out systems for letting the dogs outside, even at night, and allowing inmates to clean the inevitable pee, poop, and puke.

Hassles aside, the classes cost the prison nothing. Costanten funds the entire Cedar Creek program with donations. Albertsen weekly finds gifts from correctional officers and other prison staff in his mailbox: jars of peanut butter that he keeps in his office to fill dog toys, as well as bowls, bags of kibble, collars.

Costanten is constantly rotating the half dozen animals at Cedar Creek; for one thing, the longer each stays, the more attached the inmate trainers become. If the dogs stay in the prison too long, they lose their ability to function in crowded public spaces like stores, sidewalks, theaters, and buses. Without car rides, some become carsick. Like the inmates, dogs can become institutionalized. And like inmates, it can compromise their ability to work on the outside.

It happens even though Cedar Creek is cheerfully noninstitutional. No walls, no guard towers ring the prison yard. Save for the barbed wire atop the perimeter fence, the facility could be a church retreat. Costanten, a diminutive woman, holds the classes, supervised only by Albertsen.

Teacher's Pet Aiden in class



Online Only
See more of
Mike Kane's
photos from
Cedar Creek at
[seattlemet.com/
prisonpets](http://seattlemet.com/prisonpets).



Top of the Class Gregory and his collie Sally in class in the Cedar Creek visiting room, which is covered in cartoon murals

But Cedar Creek is still a prison. COs break up fights and search ceilings for contraband like cell-brewed hooch. Several years ago, a group of inmates took over a wing of one housing unit, trashing the duty station and claiming one of the prison yards. And then there's the more mundane—the inmates don't have clippers to trim the dogs' nails, so Costanten spends the occasional class performing doggie manicures.

The men holding leashes in the Cedar Creek visiting room have all committed a felony or five. They have burgled and kidnapped and even murdered. Larry Gregory Jr., the de facto leader of the group—the other inmates call him “Junior” and go to him for advice—has a rap sheet that includes dozens of violations, burglaries, DUIs, and drug crimes.

In April 2003, Gregory carjacked a 1991 Oldsmobile Bravada at South Hill Mall in Puyallup. He said to its owner, at gunpoint, “Do you want me to kill you? Move over and don't think about running away, because I will shoot.” He demanded her ATM pin before releasing her with further threats; he was arrested in the car a week later. The victim wrote in a statement months later that she was still traumatized by the gun in her face; Gregory also stole the bowling ball she'd used in her first perfect game.

Given his crime-ridden past, Gregory was headed to hard time. In a Pierce

County courtroom in 2004, while accepting a plea deal, Gregory's lawyer told the judge why the 37-year-old deserved a break.

Gregory, attorney Bryan Hershman said, minimized the abuse he suffered as a child, but his father came to the lawyer's office to give an account of the beatings. Hershman reported that Larry Gregory Sr. shook his son as an infant and held him over the stairs at age 13, “contemplating how he should drop him and kill him.” The father “spoke as if we were talking about a Seahawks game, of how he didn't particularly like him when he was born.”

Summing up his plea for leniency, Hershman concluded, “In the card game of life, some of us are dealt a hand that isn't always very fair. This young man I'm not sure was really even dealt a hand.”

Gregory has now been “down”—or incarcerated—for more than a decade. He still downplays the abuse and welcomes regular visits from his parents. His drug use, he says, and a bad crowd put him down the destructive path: “I think actually that might sound funny, but I'm glad this happened. The stuff I was doing, I might not have [stayed] alive. So it's kind of a blessing.”

Gregory was sentenced to 170.5 months—14 years—for kidnapping in the first degree, robbery in the first degree, and possession of stolen property. He went to closed custody, the state's form of maximum security, at Clallam Bay Corrections Center. “There were a lot of stab-bings in the chow hall,” Gregory remem-

bers quietly. “It was an eye opener.”

Then he spent a few years in various levels of custody at Stafford Creek and some at McNeil, the now-shuttered island prison in south Puget Sound. Inmates reach Cedar Creek only if they're “short,” or have fewer than four years left to serve on their sentence; Gregory's now been here two and a half years.

Throughout that time, he attended computer classes, welding classes, and Narcotics Anonymous meetings—he found the group so essential that he got an illegal tattoo that says “NA” on his left forearm. He earned his GED at Stafford Creek.

And Gregory took parenting classes. He doesn't look old enough to have two twentysomething sons; though he's in his late 40s, his neat, blond haircut has just a little gray. Both of his sons are currently serving time in prison too, the youngest at Clallam Bay. “I gotta figure out how I can get 'em back on the straight and narrow,” he says. “It's not a life.”

Most dogs at Cedar Creek are purebred; Aiden is the lone mutt. The collies and Labradors descend from lineages better documented than those of the royal houses of Europe, bred for intelligence, health, and disposition.

No one really knows how many breeds are in Aiden's blood. His glossy brown and black hair suggests a German and Australian shepherd mix, but you can squint one way to see some boxer resemblance, the other to see that he walks like a Doberman.

Aiden barely encountered humans for the first six weeks of his life. His fertile mother eluded dog rescuers for years, roaming the 21-square-mile Lummi reservation but always depositing her litters under the same trailer. The feral pack grew to as many as 20 dogs, surviving by begging and scavenging, though many died from car strikes. The puppies were born into a hungry life, so when humane society volunteers placed live traps around the trailer, the still-squirming puppies took the bait.

All captured dogs show signs of fear, but one was clearly petrified—and loud. When a volunteer from Bellingham's Alternative Humane Society removed him from the contraption, the little guy nipped him with his baby teeth. The volunteer gave him a Gaelic name to match his terrified bravery: Aiden, or “little fiery one.”

Like his siblings, Aiden was taken to a foster home to be habituated to humans, not to mention neutered, vaccinated, and house trained. The foster owner's son cuddled him so well he lost his fear of people and displayed a quick intelligence. When he was six months old the foster owner called Brigadoon Service Dogs to see if the organization wanted him.

“In the card game of life, some of us are dealt a hand that isn't always very fair. **This young man I'm not sure was really even dealt a hand.**”

At Cedar Creek, Costanten has an easy rapport with her inmate students. They thank her for sending them Christmas cards, and unlike COs and fellow inmates, she calls them by their first names. Even with the faint smell of dog poop still in the air, they eagerly share their successes with Costanten.

Gregory, in his first week of working with a smooth collie named Sally, shows how he taught her to sit on his lap; the act will calm Sally's future owner, prone to anxiety attacks.

Andrew Rogers, a 36-year-old who's been down almost 20 years, notes that his golden retriever Zola is "still puppy crazy" and proudly shows off his pink forearm that she playfully chewed. When he was 17, Rogers pled guilty to first-degree murder of a 13-year-old boy. Now known as Flip, he laughs as much as he talks and impresses Costanten with his training results. Once he ran out of assigned tasks to teach Zola, Rogers says, he improvised: He holds out a hand, says, "High five!" and chortles as Zola swats back with her padded paw.

Costanten, all business, instructs him to teach Zola to remove socks, a common skill requirement for service dogs with disabled owners. "If she tugs on my socks and rips a hole in them, I'm not gonna get new ones," points out Rogers. Not quite true, but prison, like security, is never convenient.

Between practicalities—when to click the clicker, when to dispense kibble from the pouches worn on the inmates' hips—Costanten reinforces the level of responsibility they've taken on. When something goes wrong, she stresses, "It's always the handler's fault. Every handler gets the dog he deserves." When an inmate's dog fails to perform, she's firm. "Don't get embarrassed. Try again."

Classes are held only once a week, but the inmates happily devote every day to training. Last year, Gregory learned that his fox-red Labrador, Roma, might be assigned to a veteran in a wheelchair. Since Gregory couldn't take her to the local 7-Eleven to practice shopping from a chair, he enlisted fellow dog program all-star Trent DeJardine and built a fake store.

And wagging tails don't just make inmates happier; **they make them better able to rejoin society.**



Lessons Learned Andrew Rogers, or Flip, treats his retriever Zola after a lesson.

They made a trip to the prison's carpentry shop for a long piece of scrap wood; voila, a store counter. No currency of any kind is allowed in Cedar Creek, so Gregory and DeJardine cut slips of paper and drew dollar bills by hand. They crafted a wallet from paper. "Which is all contraband," Albertsen says, "but I have to keep it a bit in perspective"—so he wrangles approvals.

Then, using items they'd purchased from the commissary, Gregory and DeJardine slowly taught Roma to take the money in her mouth and drop it on the counter, then deliver each purchase—a stick of deodorant, a shoe—to the seated Gregory.

"They continue to amaze me, what they can teach these dogs to do," says Albertsen. "And they come up with a lot of it on their own."

Pets in prisons aren't just widespread in Washington. The idea was born here. The concept harks back to Seattle-born Robert Stroud, the Birdman of Alcatraz, who famously turned his cell into an aviary. The modern practice was pioneered by Sister Pauline Quinn, a Dominican nun, who, as a 39-year-old abuse survivor in 1981, was determined to bring the healing powers of canine companionship to new venues. She walked into the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor having never held a job before and convinced the staff to let her start a canine program. The pilot at the women's prison became the non-profit Prison Pets Partnership, responsible for more than 700 service dogs and pets; other prisons cultivated their own versions.

As of 2012, 159 facilities across 36 states had introduced animal programs, which yielded plenty of anecdotal evidence that they work. Countless studies have concluded that companion animals lower blood pressure and reduce stress, and

an Oklahoma prison reported decreased levels of depression and aggression when dogs were present. A Canadian study found the dog handlers scored lower on the mournfully named UCLA Loneliness Scale.

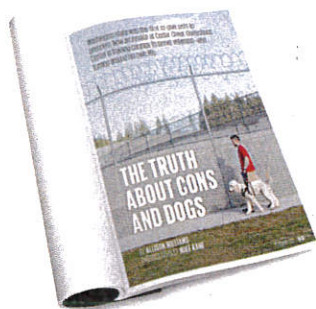
And wagging tails don't just make inmates happier; they make them better able to rejoin society. A 2006 article in *The Prison Journal* suggests that the dogs represent a living being that won't judge them for their past mistakes. Costanten notes that learning patience makes them better husbands, parents, and employees.

Though no study has definitively proved it, all signs point to pet programs combating the bane of the correctional complex: recidivism. Between 40 and 60 percent of released inmates end up back behind bars. Yet one Wisconsin program reported that of 68 released inmates who participated in the dog program, not one had returned to prison—powerful, if unsubstantiated success, skewed by the fact that only the best-behaved inmates get into such programs in the first place.

Plus, the programs benefit both the animals and society at large. Prison labor is cheap and plentiful, and high quality to boot—New York's Puppies Behind Bars program found that 87 percent of dogs trained by inmates graduated from training, while only 50 percent of those overseen by outside volunteers made the cut. Postrelease, a third of the programs saw ex-cons continue to work with animals in their communities.

Aiden's first night in prison was rough. Though Gregory had learned to keep his head down when he entered closed custody 10 years ago, he couldn't explain that to the dog that paced his room all night. Gregory woke up to the tapping of Aiden's nails on the linoleum floor. When the dog urinated

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all over the room, Gregory was astounded that his hard-sleeping cellie, or roommate, could sleep through the stench.

Gregory, who'd lobbied hard for his spot in the dog program, didn't hold it against the dog. New places are scary; the offenders, maybe more than anyone else, get it. "They kinda get fearful," says Gregory. "Kind of like how we are, how some of us have been down awhile."

No denying, Aiden was smart. He bonded with Gregory and picked up cues and directions easily. Despite being born in a dog-only world, Aiden wasn't scared of people. In the controlled world of Cedar Creek, with Gregory, he excelled. The entire camp knew his name, and Costanten resorted to tying a yellow or red bandana around the dog's neck to remind the other inmates not to play with the pooch while he was working.

But even after eight months of training at Cedar Creek and more at Brigadoon, Aiden was a washout. His smarts couldn't compete with his tendency to freak out and get distracted. Outside prison Aiden was thrown by sounds; Costanten took him to a shopping center in Bellingham where the dog was reduced to a quivering, terrified mess by a leaf blower.

Costanten didn't give up. She had one idea left: pairing the pup with a veteran who needed a companion dog, not a service animal—a less rigorous position that still involves many of the same tasks.

Last fall she took Aiden to Joint Base Lewis-McChord to meet a veteran, a man who'd returned from overseas tours with severe PTSD. He was put on suicide watch and removed from the home he shared with his wife and two young children. Aiden and the veteran clicked.

"Certain dogs, if they connect with you, they'll do anything for you," says Costanten. "When they're out in public and there are strange noises, Aiden will accept it a lot better. He knows that the guy will protect him."

The veteran found in Aiden someone else to care for and redirect his inward-looking anxieties. By Thanksgiving the man was well enough to spend the holiday with his family. Aiden had found his forever home.

When the dog's new owner entered the hospital in December for surgery, Denise

used the break to put Aiden back at Cedar Creek for a training touchup. When the veteran finishes his recovery, the pair will take training classes together at Brigadoon so he can learn to give the cues Aiden already knows.

Gregory was thrilled to see Aiden placed with a soldier; his still-living grandfather served in World War II. "I think the biggest thing is being able to give back," says Gregory. "Give back to the veterans." Every few months, the dog program inmates get the ultimate privilege of piling into a van to visit the Washington Soldiers Home and Colony in Orting, a nursing home for veterans. They show off their dogs and pose for pictures beside the facility's backyard lake. On the drive, Gregory gets a glimpse of how his hometown of Puyallup has grown since he went down.

Trips aside, Gregory's days at Cedar Creek revolve around a comforting regularity. His dog usually awakens him around 5am for a visit outside, then he breakfasts at the mess hall, where coffee's been cut from the budget for the past eight years. Afterward, like so many on the outside, Gregory watches *SportsCenter*. His two-person cell looks exactly like a college dorm room, but cleaner: twin beds, a cheap TV—offenders can pay for cable access here in minimum security—and bulletin boards over the beds. Every photo on Gregory's board shows the training group and his dogs.

The rest of Gregory's day is shaped by the short bursts of training, 10 or 15 minutes at a time, interspersed with relaxation or workouts with his dog by his side. Sometimes they work inside, where the dog practices flipping a light switch or closing a door. Outside, while other inmates relax and work out in the small yard, Gregory leads his dogs to a small yellow curb near the mess hall to teach them how to stop

their owners at the obstacle. Though the curb is only a dozen yards from the rest of the offenders, Gregory must navigate a web of permissions that goes up to the sergeant on duty before he goes to work.

But he loves the job and imagines life as a trainer on the outside. Costanten tells Gregory she'll hire him, if budgets permit, to train dogs when he's released. The dogs he's already coached amaze the volunteer trainers back at Brigadoon. While he's eager to take her up on the offer, Gregory has one specific task in mind. He wants to go to shelters and comb their ranks for possible service dog candidates—dogs like Aiden.

"You can just tell if they make eye contact," he says, and if they can quickly pick up the touch game, bopping their noses to the trainer's hand on command. Gregory's convinced he can turn those shelter animals into success stories.

"When I was out there, I did a lot of bad things," says Gregory in his quiet manner, sitting on his narrow twin bed and scratching Aiden's head—if he stops for even a moment, the dog whines in protest. "So now this kinda helps me so I can do positive things for the veterans and everybody else."

When he's not training, Gregory and his cellie, who works in maintenance and acts as a secondary dog handler, talk about what they're going to do when they get out.

"I might drive truck. Long haul, see the country," says Gregory. And riding shotgun he pictures a dog of his own, one he can train but never has to give away. A rescued Labrador retriever, perhaps; a steady companion to share his life on the outside. Only one minor problem: After a decade in prison and hardly any rides in a vehicle, Gregory gets carsick. Like the dogs, he'll need to get used to the road again. ♦

Cell Life Aiden with Gregory in the two-man room they shared

