

ON THE INSIDE, LOOKING OUT

Prison programs transform inmates as well as animals

BY JAMES HETTINGER



Through the Pen Pals program at San Quentin, dogs help humanize the inmates, while the inmates make the dogs more adoptable.

San Quentin, what good do you think you do? Do you think I'll be different when you're through?

Johnny Cash sang those questions in 1969, recording his hit "San Quentin" live during a concert at the facility that inspired it.

Cash sung that he hated every inch of California's oldest state prison. But these days, some of the jail's residents—and a few lucky dogs—might feel differently about the penitentiary.

It's not that San Quentin's magically become a nice place to be. It's still the largest prison in the state, housing more than 5,000 inmates at the end of 2008. It's home to the state's only death row for male inmates, and the list of those currently housed there includes some of the most notorious and violent felons around. In 2005, a federal judge threatened to strip Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of his authority over the California prison system unless his administration dealt with ongoing problems at San Quentin and other state correctional facilities; the warden was fired later that year.

But 2005 also saw the beginning of a small, good thing: San Quentin began hosting Pen Pals, a Marin Humane Society (MHS) program that enables some carefully screened inmates to care for and train shelter dogs.

The San Quentin complex is so large that it has its own firehouse, separate from the main prison. Pen Pals dogs share modest rooms above the firehouse with their handlers, who are low-security inmates working as firefighters. Once the dogs complete the program, which typically takes about a month, they return to MHS for adoption.

"To tell you the truth, the firehouse—if you're an inmate in San Quentin or you're a dog—is the best place to be," says Larry Carson, a Marin Humane canine evaluator and the coordinator of the Pen Pals program. "You're basically with somebody almost all the time. You're in a room, you're in a more normal environment. You're getting stimulation, you're getting training, you're not sitting in a run. ... It's a good situation for them."

San Quentin's not the only big house involved in helping ready shelter animals for new homes. Dozens of prisons around the country have teamed up with area shelters and rescue groups to establish similar programs.

Participants say the benefits are mutual, with the rewards outweighing any risks. Shelters acquire precious foster space and willing trainers, saving animals' lives. And progressive prisons, which aim to help convicted criminals become functional citizens—making them less likely to commit crimes again upon release—are witnessing how the calming presence of animals can help.

The programs produce more-adoptable dogs (and, in some cases, cats), as well as people who are better-prepared for life after prison.

"We're both in the rehabilitation business," says Carson. "And hopefully if we do our job and they do their job, everybody comes out ahead."

The prisoners involved in the program will eventually be released, he adds, so society benefits if they have the best possible attitude. "Taking care of dogs and having those responsibilities makes you a better person," he says. "It makes you more human."

The Human Factor

Hardcore crime-and-punishment types might argue that the inmates at these facilities are there because they've already shown themselves to be all *too* human, all *too* prone to indulge the darker elements of human nature.

But people can change—and prisoners aren't the only beneficiaries of these programs. And while Carson acknowledges that some San Quentin staffers initially wondered if the prisoners deserved dogs, and also raised security and health concerns, he says the program has proceeded virtually incident-free. He lists a dog who escaped for a few days as the biggest problem it's encountered.

A prison program in Kansas wasn't so fortunate, as two of its participants did a very human thing several years ago—and wound up grabbing national headlines.

In February 2006, Toby Young, founder and director of the Safe Harbor Prison Dog Program at the state-run Lansing Correctional Facility, smuggled convicted murderer John Manard—one of the program's dog handlers—out of jail in a dog crate. Young had reportedly fallen in love with the convict; authorities captured the couple 12 days later as they were leaving a bookstore in Chattanooga, Tenn.

The story proved juicy enough to briefly become a media sensation: Young was a 48-year-old mother and cancer survivor with a failing marriage, while Manard was a 27-year-old serving a life sentence for murder. (Young, who pleaded guilty to giving a firearm to a convicted felon, was released from federal prison in May 2008. Manard was sentenced to 130 months for his role in the escape, and later received an additional 10-year sentence for possessing a firearm.)

The incident turned a harsh media spotlight on Safe Harbor, but it failed to kill the program. Brett Peterson, a Safe Harbor volunteer who works as a policy and compliance officer for the Lansing jail, says officials never considered shuttering Safe Harbor. "I think people see this as something bigger than any one person," he says.

Founded in 2004, Safe Harbor fosters dogs from shelters throughout the Midwest with the roughly 100 Lansing inmates trained as handlers. The handlers do basic dog



Inmate firefighters at San Quentin State Prison in California train and socialize dogs through a partnership with the Marin Humane Society.



In July 2009, inmates Randal Rostron (left) and Richard McPeak (right) at Northpoint Training Center in Kentucky welcomed their new canine companion. When a prison riot broke out later in the summer, inmates involved in the dog training program protected the animals from the violence.

training and provide companionship and care. The program holds adoption events nearly every Saturday at a PetSmart in Shawnee, Kan. Working with the Greater Kansas City Humane Society and local veterinarians, Safe Harbor arranged more than 3,000 spay/neuter surgeries in its first five years of operation, and also makes sure its dogs get the necessary vaccinations and medications, Peterson says.

"The program was not the problem," says Bill Miskell, a spokesman for the Kansas Department of Corrections. The escape sparked a review of security procedures but in no way reflected poorly on Safe Harbor, Miskell says, noting that Safe Harbor's inmate dog trainers learn marketable skills and generally cause fewer disciplinary problems.

As a result of the incident, Safe Harbor has become "hyper-conscious" of security, stepping up its X-ray ability and package-detection procedures, Peterson says. The dogs don't alter the rules; people go through the same security whether they have a dog or not, and a dog's medication is subject to the same package-detection process as a person's lunch. All but one of the Safe Harbor volunteers are prison employees or relatives of prison employees, according to Peterson.

Peterson, who concedes that the immediate aftermath of the escape was "pretty scary," paints a beatific picture of the Safe Harbor program today, noting he can look out his window and see an inmate walking two shelter beagles whose tails are wagging. "It's really pretty peaceful."

The escape by Young and Manard was shocking, embarrassing, and disappointing, Peterson says, but Safe Harbor officials quickly turned their attention to picking up

the pieces. The escape occurred on a Sunday, and by the following Saturday Safe Harbor volunteers had pooled their resources to set up an adoption day at PetSmart.

Dispelling the Doubts

Other groups have also refused to be daunted by the idea of entering prisons and dealing with prisoners.

Terry Henry, executive director of the all-volunteer, nonprofit Paws4people Foundation, says he's often asked whether he has reservations about using inmates to train dogs. "To tell you the truth, the answer is no." To Henry, his organization's prison program—known as Paws4prisons—seems like it was meant to be.

The Paws4prisons program teaches inmates in federal prisons in several Eastern/Mid-Atlantic states to train dogs from breeders, shelters, and rescues. After training, the dogs are adopted to clients who include children with disabilities and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Henry views the program as a "win" for the inmates, the people who need the dogs, the dogs themselves, and the prison system because the inmates "have a different mindset after they hook up with the veterans and the kids and the dogs." After lifetimes of selfish behavior, many inmates realize the importance of helping other people, Henry says. They also get nonjudgmental, unconditional love from the dogs—which, he notes, is a foreign concept for many inmates.

Founded in 2007, Paws4prisons grew out of the foundation that Henry's daughter, Kyria Henry, started in 1999, when she was 12. Paws4people began with Kyria bringing

dogs to visit nursing homes and hospitals, and later evolved to include dogs working with special-needs students. The Henrys branched out into prisons after Kyria, as a West Virginia University sophomore in 2006, met the new warden at the women's prison in nearby Hazelton, W.Va., who wanted to start a dog program.

The Henrys hesitated at first, but decided to take a chance after doing some Internet research and reading about the Cell Dogs program in Seattle, which claimed a successful seven-year track record.

Paws4prisons works in low-security women's prisons, so its volunteers don't fear for their safety, Henry says. The program frequently refines its process for selecting inmate dog trainers, and has gotten better at choosing those who will succeed, he adds.

The program has a four-tiered application process that includes an interview by Paws4prisons officials and screening by the prison to make sure the candidates have no history of violence or sexual or animal abuse. Selected inmates begin as entry-level trainers and work their way up to become senior trainers—a process that involves academic coursework, tests, and handler evaluations, and takes about two years.

He estimates that about one-third of the applicants either don't get into the program or quickly get weeded out. "Some of them will self-eliminate after the first three months, because they go, 'Man, this is way more than I bargained for.'"

And he cautions that "inmates are inmates," meaning they're good at manipulation and getting what they want—which might be a dog to be around, rather than one they have to train according to the program's protocols.

In such cases, Henry isn't afraid to resort to tough love. He tells the inmates, "You either play by the rules and get into the system, or we'll find somebody else that wants to be here. It's not like we have any trouble filling slots."

If he ever worried about a dog's safety, he says, that dog wouldn't be in the prison, and the inmates involved would no longer be part of the program.

Strong Attachments

Maleah Stringer, co-director of animal care and control in Anderson, Ind., and president of the local Animal Protection League, takes a similar approach at the programs she runs for dogs and cats at Pendleton Correctional Industrial Facility, a state-run prison. The FIDO (Faith + Inmates + Dogs = Opportunity) program for dogs and the 9 Lives program for cats at Pendleton both involve inmates training and socializing animals. "We don't talk about them having 'pets,'" she says. The inmates are expected to view their responsibilities as a job, Stringer says, and if they don't follow the program's rules, they get fired. It's a strict system by necessity.

But for Stringer, the experience has also been an eye-opener. She initially expected to not like the inmates, but was shocked to see how they took proud ownership of the pro-

grams, and how even those who weren't working as handlers wanted to pet the animals and learn their names. She sees the programs teaching the inmates to look beyond themselves, take responsibility, and resolve conflicts nonviolently.

"It has been a life-changing experience for me," she says. "What it's taught me is to try to judge people—not just in prison, but anywhere—as to who they are right now, instead of looking at what they've done and constantly judging."

The humanizing elements of these programs run both ways. In Boyle County, Ky., inmates at Northpoint Training Center, a prison near Danville, quickly embraced a dog-training program that began in July in partnership with the Boyle County Humane Society—so much so that they put themselves at risk to protect the dogs during an August prison riot.

When the rioting started, inmates led the dogs out of their dormitory on leashes, had them lie down, then lay on top of them to protect them from the smoke from the fires



Inmates at Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas socialize and train dogs like Roxanne through the Safe Harbor Prison Dog Adoption Program.

and chemical agents as authorities sought to quell the disturbance, according to an account by the prison.

"The night of the riot, these inmates considered the dogs' safety above their own," says Rita Douglas, a correctional unit administrator for the Kentucky Department of Corrections. "The inmates literally covered the dogs with their own bodies and led them to an area out of harm's way."

Some inmate dog handlers, in written assessments collected for this story by the prison administration, praise the program for giving them responsibility and hope.

Inmate Joseph Burton says the program teaches a marketable skill, provides "a sense of belonging and purpose," and helps the participants feel "a sense of responsibility so you don't lose sight of who you are."

Inmate Lamar Donaldson III says emphatically that he would participate in the program again because "I love what it stands for. Everyone deserves a second chance at life, love and happiness. What it does for us [is] it builds character, and makes you a better person, letting your good light to shine."



Larry Carson of the Marin Humane Society (right) says having shelter dogs handled by inmate firefighters at San Quentin has proved to be a perfect fit.



Gidget, a dog in the Safe Harbor Prison Dog Program, relaxes with her handler at Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas.

The program gives shelter dogs a second chance, adds inmate Jontre Fogle, “and I just want to show people that they are good dogs and deserve to be loved and not left at the shelter.”

Inmate Kenny Burton says he would take part in the initiative again “because this program has been through a lot in its first run. However, we came out with positive results in the midst of chaos.”

Working in a Controlled System

While prison riots are an unusual occurrence, bringing animals into an environment with such serious security issues requires careful planning on the part of any organization considering establishing such a program.

When Carson caught the pilot episode for *Animal Planet’s Cell Dogs* show a few years ago, he thought a dog-training program involving inmates would be a perfect fit for Marin Humane, which has a large behavior and training department and is about a 20-minute drive from San Quentin.

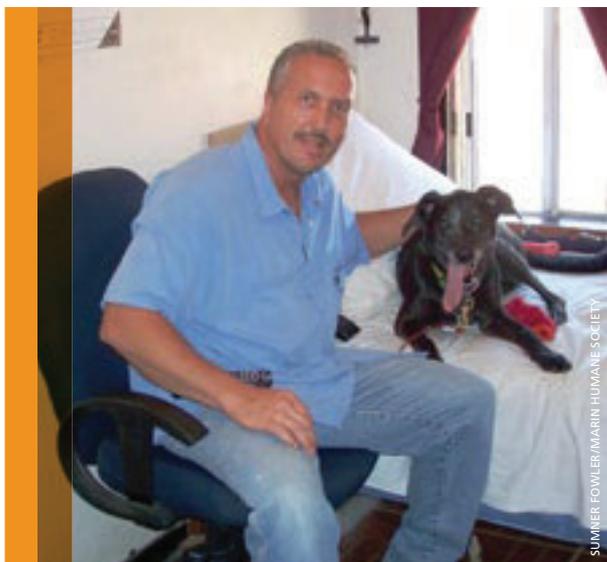
He was determined to do it right, and took the time to visit Nevada Humane Society and the Nevada State Prison, which collaborate on a program called Puppies Up for Parole (profiled in *Animal Sheltering* in May-June 2004). “I spent about four hours with the warden at the Nevada State Prison, and he said, ‘This is the best program we’ve ever had here.’ He said it’s cut down violence by 30 percent in the prison. He said the whole nature of the institution has changed,” Carson says.

Carson developed written protocols for MHS using the Nevada program as a model, then pitched the program to San Quentin. The protocols cover such issues as when the dogs can be walked, where they can go in the prison, who can participate, what they’re required to do, and who is responsible for the program at both San Quentin and Marin Humane, Carson explains. The shelter had no previous connection to the prison, but San Quentin officials liked the idea.

The legal obstacles were few, he adds, and within a prison’s walls, wardens are essentially free to establish whatever program they’d like. “One thing I found out once we started this thing is that prisons are basically little fiefdoms,” Carson says. “The warden pretty much controls everything in a prison. So whatever he wants to do—within, of course, the law—he can pretty much do.”

Opened in 1852, San Quentin’s cells are too small to accommodate dogs, but Carson says the firehouse, which houses about 15 inmate firefighters, is ideal for the Pen Pals program. The rooms are big enough, there’s a fenced-in yard, and the dogs are able to lead largely normal lives. The inmates exercise the dogs in the morning, feed them, and are responsible for giving them any medications. By 3 p.m. the inmates are typically done with their jobs—as firefighters and emergency responders on the prison grounds—leaving them free for walks and training.

The prison screens inmates before allowing them to live in the firehouse (they must have a clean behavior record, and



Pen Pals dogs have the best spots in the house at San Quentin, sharing rooms above the firehouse with inmates who also serve as firefighters.

no one convicted of a violent crime is permitted), and Marin Humane screens further to make sure the Pen Pals participants have no history of animal, spousal, or child abuse, Carson says.

Marin also screens the dogs it sends to San Quentin, about 60 percent of whom are medical fosters, such as dogs who have been treated for heartworm and need several weeks to recuperate. Another 20 percent are shy dogs who need some one-on-one time, and the final 20 percent are typically adolescent dogs who need behavior training to become good candidates for adoption, Carson explains.

Ideally, the program assigns each dog two inmates—a primary and a secondary handler, Carson says. If the primary handler is running a fire call, the secondary handler takes responsibility for the dog. If both handlers are busy with their jobs, the dog goes back to the room on tie-down or is crated, though they aren't crated for more than two hours and are rarely left unattended for that long, he says. The inmates' rooms have no doors, he explains, so in tie-down situations the dogs are leashed with a five-foot cable within the room. This gives them enough space to lie on their beds, reach their water bowls, and relax outside of their crates.

Carson, along with an instructor and a dog training assistant, visits San Quentin every Tuesday and Thursday to work with the inmates and their dogs. The Pen Pals inmates, who must have a high school diploma or GED, keep a daily log of their dogs' activities, which helps the MHS staff identify issues that need to be addressed.

The medical fosters return to MHS when they're fully recuperated. For the dogs with behavior issues, Carson determines when they're ready to come back; many take a Canine Good Citizenship Test, and after they pass, their certificate is posted on their cage in the shelter to catch the eye of potential adopters.

San Quentin, what good do you think you do?

Do you think I'll be different when you're through?

For some inmates—and the dogs they work with—the answer to Cash's accusing questions is yes.

The Pen Pals program teaches the prisoners' responsibility and helps boost their self-esteem, Carson asserts. "They take a dog that basically knows nothing when they get there, or is sick. And then, through nurturing, through training, they see that dog become healthy, become trained, and then go to a family in the community as a loving pet," he says. "It also gives them a connection with the outside community. Not only do we come in twice a week, but they realize that they're doing something positive with their time there."

Pen Pals has been a tremendous addition to Marin Humane's foster program, Carson says, noting that the shelter can now treat dogs who need a long recuperation period. And the San Quentin training makes dogs more adoptable, he adds. As of late September, 129 dogs had gone through the program, including about 16 who got adopted by San Quentin staff.

The initiative has cost cash-strapped California nothing; MHS foots the bill through grants and donations—a formula Carson recommends for any shelter trying to convince a prison to agree to a jailhouse dog program. The Pen Pals program has an annual budget of about \$12,000, which covers the cost of veterinary care and transport, plus items including food, toys, leashes, harnesses, treat bags, crates, and dog beds. The program also supplies training books, laundry detergent for dog towels and bedding, and cleaning materials for the rooms. The trainers and instructors work as volunteers.

Marin Humane helped start a similar program at a prison in Susanville, Calif., and Carson says he's willing to extend a helping hand to others as well. He hasn't encountered any forward-thinking prison facilities that oppose the concept. "Even if they don't know a lot about behavior training and the intricacies of the dog world," he says, "they understand what that animal connection does to a person." **AS**

To read about a project in Pennsylvania that helps juvenile offenders develop better attitudes toward animals, go to animalsheltering.org/wider_horizons.

Resources

- Larry Carson is willing to show interested organizations how the Marin Humane Society's Pen Pals program is structured and how to develop written protocols. E-mail him at lcarson@marinhumanesociety.org.
- More information about the Paws4people Foundation (including the Paws4prisons program and its marketing arm, SlammerDogz) is available at paws4people.org.
- A video on the FIDO program in Indiana is available on the Animal Protection League website at inapl.org.