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HOME OF BREED AMBASSADORS

An Unexpected Truth

In Nebraska, one shelter's strategy for coping with breed-specific legislation saves lives

BY VAL POULTON

Because Omaha has a problem with dogfighting, when I started with the Nebraska Humane Society (NHS) five years ago, we had a policy not to adopt out pit bulls or pit bull mixes. Concerned for the safety of our citizens who might adopt a pit bull or pit bull mix of questionable background, and fearing that one of our dogs could end up used for fighting, we did not place any dog who looked like he *might* be a pit bull mix. Thus, a dog with “pitty features” would likely be euthanized.

But dogfighting decreased dramatically in our community. According to Mark Langan, our vice president of field operations, after a police-assisted 2005 investigation of an Omaha-based dogfighting operation resulted in the main player being indicted on federal drug charges, many other dogfighting participants fled Nebraska. In 2006, we began offering a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the bust of a dogfight in progress. While we haven't paid it out, it's publicized frequently, and Mark believes it's caused a slowdown in dogfighting.

In the wake of the decrease in fighting activity, the staff of our behavior department was confident that we could evaluate individual animals' behavior and find safe and stable dogs to offer for adoption to responsible owners. In 2007, we pulled together a task force to investigate the challenges and identify the pros and cons of adding pit bulls and pit bull mixes to our adoption program.

The task force contacted pit bull advocacy groups and shelters that included pit bulls in their adoption programs, and we ended up with a special adoption program for pit bulls. Interested parties could pre-apply, and if, after a background check, we were comfortable with adopting to them, we would find them a dog. In the early days of the program in 2007, we adopted out two pit bulls. It was more difficult to find interested adopters than it was to find adoptable dogs, but this may have been due to an overall lack of familiarity with the program.

Tragic Misdirection

Then in 2008, something terrible happened: A local child was mauled by a dog who was identified as a pit bull. Those

of us who work in this field would recognize there were several factors in the care and keeping of this dog—he was intact, and spent his days tethered in a backyard where he was frequently teased by neighbor children—that made him a bite risk. His breed was the least of these factors, but the media and the public grabbed on to the dog's breed identification and ignored the circumstances.

The mauling led to a push for a breed ban, threatening to undo all the work we'd put into trying to find a safe way to place some of these dogs. In the end, we managed to avoid a ban, but we do now have breed-specific legislation. (Don't think it will never happen to you!)

In October 2008, the city council passed a breed-specific muzzling ordinance. Beginning January 2009, all “pit bulls” were required to be muzzled and harnessed when outside a securely fenced area. At the Nebraska Humane Society, we were dismayed that we would be dealing with breed-specific ordinances—but there has been an interesting twist to this unfortunate event.

When the ordinance was passed, it defined “pit bull” as “... any dog that is an American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Dogo Argentino, Presa Canario, Cane Corso, American Bulldog, or any dog displaying the majority of physical traits of any one or more of the above breeds (more so than any other breed), or any dog exhibiting those distinguishing characteristics which substantially conform to the standards established by the American Kennel Club or United Kennel Club for any of the above breeds.”

Accordingly, those dogs that physically *appear* to be primarily pit bull (and according to the city, that includes several breeds, including some mastiffs) must be muzzled, harnessed, and follow other breed-specific rules.

Sweetening Bitter Medicine

To make the new ordinance more bearable, we proposed a program that allows dogs to “test out” of the muzzling requirement. When a “majority” pit bull passes a Canine Good Citizen test administered by NHS, he trades his muzzle for a Breed Ambassador vest. The dog must retest and pass annually



to keep his ambassador status. As of December 2009, 53 pit bulls have passed the test and become Breed Ambassadors.

We also proposed (and Omaha adopted) revisions to the city's dangerous-dog ordinance. The city also accepted our recommendations to add a "potentially dangerous" citation (one that's based on a particular dog's behavior history, not on his breed), a reckless-owner citation, and an ordinance

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that restricts tethering to no more than 15 minutes. Thus we managed to get a good tethering law in on the heels of an ordinance that at first seemed to have no silver lining.

These revisions are aimed at changing the other end of the leash, promoting awareness that irresponsible pet owners are a large part of the problem. We feel that these revisions to the breed-specific part of the city's ordinances have brought public attention to responsible pet ownership. One indicator that it's working has been a sharp increase in our licensing compliance.

As we were working through the issues of identifying dogs who fit the ordinance's definition, we began to contemplate whether any dog who seemed less than a "majority" pit bull was really a pit bull. So many breeds of dogs share physical traits with animals mentioned in the ordinance, how could we know that this dog with "pitty features" actually had any pit bull in him at all?

We approached our board of directors about considering placements for those dogs identified as having pitty features, but whom we identified as being less than "majority" pit bull. The dogs would have to pass behavior and medical evaluations in order to be offered for adoption. The board agreed.

We did so well with adopting out these "minority" pit bulls and "All-Americans" (our term for dogs with such mixed heritage that we couldn't venture a guess) that we again approached our board, this time about considering "majority" pit bulls for adoption.

A Promise Kept

Again, the BOD agreed, and in October 2009 we adopted out our first. Her name is Promise, and she was adopted out with the required muzzle and harness and free classes. Under the ordinance, she is not allowed to visit the local dog park, so she comes to our staff dog play groups on Sundays.

Before we began adopting out pit bulls, we anticipated some major problems. We were concerned that no one in our community would adopt them, and that their behavior might deteriorate while they were waiting for new homes.

But interestingly, at the end of 2009, the average length of stay in adoption for our pit bulls/mixes was shorter than average for dogs overall. Promise was in the adoption area for only two days before finding her family. Her adopter had been so excited we had a pit bull available for adoption that he came in just to see her, just to see if it was true. This man had no intention of adopting Promise (now named Simi)—that is, until he met her. She gets along famously with his resident pit bull mix.

Our experience with this man showed us what we'd known already: Local pit bull lovers were well-aware of what had previously happened when one came to NHS—euthanasia—and they were now ecstatic about the new opportunities for these dogs in Omaha.



Promise, now named Simi (right), cuddles up with her buddy in her new home.

As a result of the breed-specific legislation, we could have come up with reason after reason not to promote pit bull mixes and “majority” pit bulls for adoption. And heaven knows the local media continues to give our citizens reasons not to adopt them—the coverage of pit bull behavior continues to be focused on the breed rather than the other factors that could make any dog a bite risk. But we have



Val Poulton is vice president of behavior and placement at the Nebraska Humane Society. The photos on the wall behind her honor dogs who are part of the shelter’s Breed Ambassador program.

used the legislation to move forward and promote this often neglected and abused breed, and provide our community with a program that helps make the dogs safer.

I’m proud of my shelter for taking a stand and trusting there are people in our community who will step up and do the right thing for these dogs. I am equally proud of those in my community who demonstrate that trust is deserved. **AS**

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