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## Prison Puppies

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BEDFORD HILLS, N.Y.

JAYMIE POWERS, a 43-year-old mother of three grown children who is in prison for second-degree murder, is seated in a wheelchair pretending to be a disabled person shopping at a supermarket. She is working on getting a Labrador retriever, Devon, to fetch a box of cereal from a counter and place it in a straw bag.

“Devon, watch me!” she commands, trying to get Devon to fix his attention on her.

“Devon, up,” she says, coaxing him to climb onto the counter.

It takes a while for Devon to get his mouth around the edge of the box but when he finally does, Ms. Powers orders him to “drop it!” and he does, right into the straw bag.

“That’s it!” Ms. Powers says with a grin of accomplishment, while her fellow prisoners at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility applaud.

Ms. Powers is one of about 30 women here who take part in a program run by an organization called Puppies Behind Bars that gets inmates at several prisons in New York, [New Jersey](#) and [Connecticut](#) to help train service dogs to assist disabled people, including veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Except for their standard-issue, forest-green garb, the women at Bedford Hills who train the dogs would not appear to be out of place at a suburban book club. Several are gray-haired grandmothers, and they speak as genially and sensibly about their lives as your next-door neighbor might. As they work with the dogs, it

is difficult to remember that they are incarcerated — that's their favorite word to describe their confinement — in a maximum-security prison because they have been convicted of killing or stabbing people or other major felonies.

The tender mercy here is that a dog does not know the difference between a prisoner and a model citizen. It responds to kindness, firmness, patience and consistency. And these women provide these qualities in bucketfuls as they train dogs to complete tasks that a disabled person cannot take for granted, like flipping a light switch, shutting a closet door or taking off socks.

“One of the things prison usually means is being useless, being defined by our worst acts,” said Judy, 58, a New York City mother with close-cropped graying hair who did not want to give her last name or to describe the crimes that landed her here. “The program gives me a sense I can be useful, useful to people on the outside, to some person who can be helped by having the fruits of my work. There's a sense that what we do has a life that's positive in other people's lives.”

The program currently places a total of 80 dogs in seven prisons in the three states of the New York region: the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility here in Westchester County, a prison for 960 women that has held inmates like Jeanne Harris and still holds Carolyn Warmus; the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for women in Clinton, N.J.; the Federal Correctional Institution, a women's prison in Danbury, Conn.; and four [New York State](#) men's prisons in Fishkill, Warwick, Wallkill and Otisville.

The puppies, all Labradors and golden retrievers, arrive at the prison when they are eight weeks old. They live in metal crates within the women's small but neat cells. The puppies remain inside the prison, working mostly with the same inmate, until they are 20 months, learning 82 commands before they are ready for their next level of more tailored training. The prisoners have learned, as part of the training, to refine their voice tones in directing the dogs — as Ms. Powers did after the shopping exercise — and the value of the consistency of their stares.

Many of the dogs will eventually be farmed out free of charge to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars who are themselves confined — to wheelchairs or to navigating life with a missing limb or two. (Indeed, the program is trying to make

veterans more aware of the dogs' availability.) Some women have a particularly tender spot for these ex-soldiers.

“We have a responsibility to these men who fought so hard for our country,” said Annette, 49, an inmate at Bedford Hills whose home is in upstate Monroe County and who declined to give her last name or describe the circumstances that led to her imprisonment.

Laurie Kellogg, 43, of Massachusetts, a slightly built woman who has been jailed for a murder that she said resulted from domestic violence, has trained a Labrador, Pax, now helping an Iraq war veteran, Bill Campbell, in Washington State.

“What I’ve done is put a year of love into this puppy who in turn will give a lifetime of love to Bill and his wife,” she said.

Jules Flynn, 39, from East Meadow on Long Island, who is serving a 15-year sentence for manslaughter, gave a slightly different spin to the program’s mission, a point she found hard to make without her voice breaking.

“We give people who receive these dogs their freedom, and that is something that was taken away from us,” she said.

The program was started 11 years ago by Gloria Gilbert Stoga, a former New York City youth-commission official who recognized there was a shortage of families willing to provide the basic training of service dogs, an understandable problem in an age of busy working couples. Ms. Gilbert Stoga founded Puppies Behind Bars, based in Manhattan, after hearing about a similar program in an Ohio prison, and she figured inmates here would also be an ideal group to provide training.

“Inmates are going nowhere, they have time on their hands,” she said.

Since 1997 the program has raised 483 dogs, according to Ms. Gilbert Stoga.

Sharon Richardson, 48, who is in prison for the murder of a man she described as her abuser, has trained her yellow Labrador, Mitzie, to stare at her as if hypnotized, every time she says “Watch me.”

That's an important command because as Sheron Thomas, 42, an inmate from Suffolk County, explained, "The people may have no limbs and may have to use their eyes to direct the puppy." Ms. Thomas is training a black Labrador, Peter, to bark to a "Speak!" command, allowing him to summon help in an emergency.

One yellow Lab, Boston, is being prepared to use his nose instead of his eyes to find things so he can graduate into more specialized training to sniff explosives for a law-enforcement agency, an irony that does not escape the prisoners. But irony or not, prison officials are happy to have a program that draws the enthusiasm of so many inmates, who are selected based on factors like behavior and neatness.

"Female offenders are just nurturing to begin with," said Ada Perez, the prison's superintendent. "This gives them something to give back to the community."

Ms. Gilbert Stoga and members of her staff visit the prison every Tuesday to guide the training. On one recent visit she showed the women how Megan, a chocolate Lab, could be made to jump atop a box by imitating Holly, a more seasoned yellow Lab. The group of women broke out in unbuttoned laughter at seeing Megan get so worked up that she forced herself to mount the box successfully.

The prisoners give lots of credit to Ms. Gilbert Stoga, whose tough love forces them to be firm with the dogs and thus train them to respond to commands with more precision. When an inmate named Fontana sat in a wheelchair pretending to be handicapped and used her hands to nudge a dog to follow her commands, Ms. Gilbert Stoga reminded her sharply, "Fontana, you don't have hands!"

The women not only train the dogs but the dogs also train them, in a way.

"When we first become incarcerated," Ms. Powers said, "you shut off, you're numb, you don't want to become vulnerable." The dogs teach them to loosen up and vent an emotion or two. "There's no other place in this facility where you can show love and caring and not feel that people will see you as weak," she said. "Our pups allow us to be human again."

Bliss Edwards is an inmate from Dutchess County. She is the mother of two teenage daughters. She is in prison for an assault in which she said she came to her

sister's defense, and she said that when she arrived at Bedford Hills as a 24-year-old woman she was "young and defiant." Now, at 32, she said that raising puppies has helped her "accept constructive criticism."

Insolence, she said she now realizes, will only get her kicked out of the program. "I had that aura that showed people I didn't care," she said. "I realized I need to show people I care."

Rosalie Cutting, 63, a slightly built mother of six daughters with her gray hair put up in a bun, has been in prison more than 20 years on a murder conviction — so long she has been able to train five dogs. She described her murder victim as a stalker and said she could not confide her fears to an abusive husband. "To be afraid all the time is a terrible thing," she said. "It makes you do irrational things." When one of her daughters died after suffering with cancer, she said, it made her "think about the pain I caused someone else, and there's nothing I can do."

But there have been the reparative opportunities created by the puppy program. She recalled one guide dog, named Greta, whom she trained as a puppy and who later, under more expert training, learned to walk on the right side of the blind woman who would eventually be her caretaker. Though guide dogs are usually trained to walk on the left side, the woman was partly paralyzed on that side.

"This is my redemption," Ms. Cutting said. "The dog and I helped give this woman back her independence."