

Wall Street Journal - Inmate-Trained Dogs Give Veterans Some Love

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With the exception of cat people who believe their kitties are the most sublime creatures on Earth, I think the rest of us can agree that dogs are man's, and more than a few women's, best friends.

The question is whether that friendship and loyalty are easily transferable?

The answer appears to be "yes" based on the experience of Puppies Behind Bars, a program that pairs service dogs, trained by prison inmates, with military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

The transfer of allegiance to the veterans from the inmates, who have typically spent at least two years with the dogs, occurs over a 16-day period when the groups work together.

"It is instantaneous," said Gloria Gilbert Stoga, the founder and president of Puppies Behind Bars. "The dogs know who they are supposed to attach themselves to."

It may have something to do with the breed—all are Labrador retrievers—and the fact the dogs know that every executed command comes with a treat. "Ronald, you have to kibble her every time," Ms. Stoga chided a participant who forgot to reward his dog when it used a cord to open a door.

This feat and many others occurred during a training session I attended last month at Otisville Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in Orange County.

While the dogs may not suffer much as they transfer their affections from one handler to the next, the same can't always be said for the prisoners, who have raised them since they were 8 weeks old.

"We definitely miss the dogs a lot. A lot," said Frank Conte, one of the prisoner trainers. "When we go back into the dorm at 4 p.m., all we talk about is the dogs and the vets. The guys who live with us, they love the dogs, too. A lot of guys have been in jail 30 years. They haven't seen a dog."

Fifteen inmates participate in the program at Otisville, one of five prison facilities in New York and New Jersey participating in Puppies Behind Bars. A sixth one is expected to start in October.

Inmates are selected based on their disciplinary records, nature of their crimes and prison sentence. Inmates with long sentences are preferred, Ms. Stoga said, so that they have time to learn the ropes and train the dogs.

Ms. Stoga's "classes" typically produce six dogs that are ready to be service animals. She refers to them as "geniuses," and she should know—she owns two that failed the

program. Ones that don't make the grade are held for further training or released for adoption.

Successful graduates learn over 90 commands and acquire astonishing skills, from pulling off their owner's socks and placing them in a laundry basket to waking them from post-traumatic-stress-related nightmares by turning on a closet light or pulling the sheets off their bed.

"After six to eight months, she'd be able to wake me up just by staring at me," said Ashley Crandall, a veteran with PTSD, referring to a previous service dog she owned named Jasmine. "She has a very intense gaze."

The session I attended also included a rehearsal for the graduation ceremony and a crisp military salute from veteran and canine companion alike. Yes, the dog raises its paw to its brow.

"It takes a while," said Ibrahim Amasha, one of the inmate trainers. "Some of them it takes months."

As well trained as the dogs are, their most important quality may be companionship, something that goes beyond snuggling up next to their owners on the couch.

"She has stopped me from becoming a statistic," said Richie Bourgeois, a retired Marine Corps major who fought in Fallujah, Iraq. He was referring to his new service dog Lucy, with whom he'd developed a quick bond. Lucy sat placidly at his feet in the recreation yard, after a swim in a baby pool used as a reward for the morning's training.

Mr. Bourgeois explained that on visits to local restaurants and stores over the previous week—that's part of the training—he remained focused on Lucy, rather than on the perceived threats that make some people with PTSD uneasy in public places.

"Their emotions are so in tune with our emotions," he said. "If you're sad, they'll nudge you with their head."

The training also includes teaching dogs to sit behind veterans, in case they are concerned about somebody approaching from behind. The dog stands and wags its tail as a warning, providing peace of mind.

"My daughter was crying on the phone," Mr. Bourgeois said. "She knows what a change it's going to be in the whole family structure. Rather than dad being a couch potato, I have a mission now every day."