



Good House Keeping

A New Leash on Life

Kathleen Renda

April 2001

She loved dogs, and didn't care much for prisoners. But when she brought the two together, she opened some minds - including her own.

Roosevelt Lewis, 54, is a career criminal a 12 to 24 year sentence at Fishkill Correctional Facility in New York. But Lewis is also the proud caregiver of Joshua, a 15 month-old golden retriever training to become a guide dog for the blind. Lewis and Joshua are par of Puppies Behind Bars, an innovative prison program created by Gloria Gilbert Stoga, 46. "Gloria's organization has brought me a long way," Lewis declares, bending down to stroke the animal that lives in his cell and shares his life. "It's made me feel like a human being. And it's given me a new outlook on everything."

That comes as no surprise to Stoga, who lives in New York City and is married with two teenage children. "The inmates are doing something meaningful," she says. "They stop walling off their emotions, and they give something back to society."

Stoga started Puppies Behind Bars in 1997, combining two of her lifelong passions: dogs and philanthropy. Prominent in charity circles Stoga was a member of a city commission helping inner-city teens find employment when her sister mailed her a newspaper clipping. The article described an Ohio penitentiary where prisoners reared pups for the visually impaired. Stoga knew she had found her calling. But there was a problem: Every guide dog school in New York that Stoga contacted wanted their puppies brought up in loving families - not by convicts in a cell block. "The schools thought it was a stupid idea," Stoga recalls.

She was undeterred. Stoga teamed five canines the schools had passed over with ten inmates at a maximum-security women's prison upstate. After 18 months with their incarcerated owners, the pups were retested by the schools and two became working guide dogs. "Here were people written off by society, raising puppies written off as guide dogs," Stoga says. "And they succeeded."

The schools for the blind finally came around. Now in its fourth year, Puppies Behind Bars has grown to include three different prisons. Each dog comes to the correctional facility at two months old and becomes the sole responsibility of a carefully selected inmate. Participants live on special puppy-raising wards, where they care for their animals 24 hours per day - overseeing everything from house-training to toenail clipping - for a year and a half. With their owners in tow, the pups attend twice-weekly obedience classes that Stoga teaches.

According to Stoga, Puppies Behind Bars has been a learning experience, not only for the inmates but also for her. Prior to founding the group, Stoga says, she had little compassion for lawbreakers: "Lock them up and throw away the key was my philosophy," she says. Now Stoga thinks otherwise. "People can change if they want to," she believes. "Especially if they are given a chance"