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Prison puppies are changing the outlook of convicts

BY RUTH BASHINSKY
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Mercedes is showing a group of other women how to get her 9-month-old puppy, Victoria, to come off the lead.

"She takes direction well, now. But I remember when we had to bribe her with Kibbles," she says.

The talk turns to successes, failures and relationships -- regular obedience-class fare. But these are not typical dog owners. They're inmates at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester County, the only maximum-security women's prison in New York state.

Roslyn, 38, of the Bronx, has served 20 years of a 50-to-life sentence for double homicide. Geraldine, 37, of Mount Vernon, N.Y., is serving 19 years to life for murder and robbery. Christina, 30, of Commack, N.Y., shot and killed her boyfriend. She is serving six to 19 years for manslaughter.

All are participants in Puppies Behind Bars, a program that teaches inmates to prepare dogs for training as guides for the blind.

Gloria Gilbert Stoga of Manhattan started the program in 1997 after reading about a similar undertaking at an Ohio prison. "I didn't have any background in dogs, corrections or sociology, but I thought it made a lot of sense to utilize people who had a lot of time on their hands," she said.

It's been so successful that New Jersey authorities have asked her to open a program next month.

There's already a program in the New York state men's prison in Downstate Correctional Facility in Fishkill, N.Y., and another is to start in the spring at Mid-Orange Correctional Facility in Warwick, N.Y.

The dogs are sent to the prison when they are 8 weeks old. For 16 months, 21 women feed and care for them. Then, the animals are released to a guide-dog school.

Raising the dogs, although rewarding, has brought up many emotional issues for the women -- especially separation anxiety when the 16 months are over and the dogs have to leave.

Jean, 47, of the Bronx, a former home health aide, left behind three children when she was sent up for murder in 1984.



"Losing Emily, the first dog I trained, brought up old feelings," Jean said. "It was like somebody just reached inside and took my heart. I still cry."

Roslyn, who gave birth to a daughter in prison a few years ago, said, "I have a little girl I didn't get to raise.

"Having a puppy is giving me a second chance at motherhood."

Stoga doesn't doubt the puppy program has changed inmates' lives.

"So much more is expected of them," she said. "These people won't be as angry and rejected. They learn skills and have a higher self-esteem, and we in society are better off."