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New leash on life

The program Puppies Behind Bars gives inmates the challenge - and joy - of raising guide dogs

Marjorie Coeyman, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

-PEEKSKILL, N.Y.

Does a prison inmate have the love and discipline required to properly nurture a puppy?

That question troubled Jane Russenberger when she first heard about Puppies Behind Bars (PBB), the unusual New York City-based program that allows inmates at two state prisons to raise guide dogs for the blind. But it's a question that Ms. Russenberger, senior director of breeding and placement for Guiding Eyes for the Blind, a guide-dog training school in Yorktown Heights, N.Y., asks no more. Today, she is eager to work with all the prison-raised dogs she can.

"The love, the level of commitment, the high level of manners the dogs develop - what comes out of the prisons is different from what we're seeing anywhere else," she says.

At first glance, puppies and inmates may seem an incongruous pairing, but Gloria Gilbert Stoga, founder and president of PBB, has proven otherwise.

Puppies Behind Bars is not the first program of its kind. The idea had its genesis in Florida, and was replicated in Ohio. But Mrs. Stoga had an uphill battle before she was allowed to place puppies with inmates - first at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison for female inmates in 1997, then at Fishkill Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison for men in Peekskill, N.Y., in 1998.

Although the program costs the state nothing, prison authorities worried it could prove an unnecessary distraction at best, and a negative experience for the dogs at worst. Guide-dog schools and users were also concerned, questioning whether the prison environment could ever be an appropriate one for puppies.



JAILHOUSE PUP: Richie López shares his small cell with four-month-old Mathilda, the fourth puppy he has raised at Fishkill Correctional Facility in Peekskill, N.Y. He is one of 15 inmates in the program.

PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF



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In the PBB program, each dog is assigned a primary trainer - who becomes the dog's principal caregiver and source of love - while other inmates serve as "floaters" who step in and work with different dogs at different moments. (Inmates are interviewed and screened before being allowed into the program; no one who has committed a "heinous" crime is permitted to work with the dogs).

At Fishkill, 15 inmates and seven to nine dogs are involved in the program. Dogs sleep in the cells of the inmates with whom they are paired, and stay with them throughout most of the day. Prisoners in the program live in a separate wing and are allowed to take their meals in their quarters with the dogs. Twice a week, inmates and dogs meet for training classes. The dogs practice sitting, standing, heeling, and simply learning to walk up and down a crowded room without becoming distracted. During much of the rest of the day, they fall into a routine of familiarity with their trainers, much as they would if they were part of a family.

"Joshua has given me back my peace of mind," says Roosevelt Lewis, an inmate in the program, of the frisky golden retriever who shares his cell and wakes him each morning with an affectionate lick. The powerful attachment between Joshua and his trainer - who sometimes gaze soulfully into one another's eyes - is evident at a glance. Even during play period in the prison yard, Joshua prefers to spend some of his time lying with his head resting between Mr. Lewis's boots rather than romping with other dogs. And Joshua is more than just a good companion, insists Lewis. "He lets me know I'm still a human being." The dog has taught him much, he says, about "pure, unadulterated love."

Participation in PBB is more than just a love fest for inmates and puppies. By all accounts, Stoga runs a tight ship. Inmates involved in the program attend classes on puppy training, do reading, homework, and take tests. Those unwilling to work are ejected from the program.



WALK THE DOG: Gloria Stoga, founder and president of Puppies Behind Bars, with inmates involved in the program at the Fishkill Correctional Facility in Peekskill, N.Y.

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GETTING THEIR LICKS IN: Vince Mojica and Koki, a black Labrador retriever pup, exchange a smooch. Inmates and guards say the dogs have made prison life better.

PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF

Held a negative view of inmates

"I ask them to fully understand what it is that they're doing, and if they can't handle the responsibility I ask them to leave," she says. But in many ways, the fact that she now works closely with inmates is a piece of irony. Stoga, who views herself as a political conservative, says that prior to PBB she held a very negative view of prison inmates. "I saw them as incorrigible," she says. But, she adds, that was before the program gave her a chance to know them as individuals.

"I'm tough with them," she admits. "I don't give them a lot of second and third chances. But I respect them, and I enjoy working with them." She laughs ruefully as she recalls that a while ago one male inmate taught her a new vocabulary word. She didn't know the meaning of the word "martinet," she says, until he told her it applied to her.

But while the inmates agree that Stoga can be severe, many express tremendous gratitude and admiration for her, with some insisting that exposure to PBB has been a turning point for them. "I owe her my life," says Lewis. "She trusted me with Joshua, and she gave me a chance to give something back to society."

For many inmates the hardest part of participation in PBB is the knowledge that at the age of close to two years, the dogs will leave, first for up to an additional year of training, and then, for those who make it - only about half of the dogs raised to be guide dogs are actually selected - on to spend most of their adult years working.

The inmates get some practice at separating from the dogs as the animals are occasionally shifted between Fishkill and Bedford Hills so they can become used to trainers of the opposite sex. Dogs also regularly spend weekends with volunteer sitters in the outside world to expose them to experiences like street noises, walking in traffic, and riding in the car.

But even so, "It's going to break my heart," says Danny Capaldo, primary trainer of Katie, an 11-month-old black Labrador, of the day when she will leave him. "She's my princess." Vince Mojica says that the day he said good-bye to Rosie, the yellow Lab he raised, he cried. But he was also filled with joy when a prison guard told him, "You did a good thing."



LOVE HAS NO BARS:
Roosevelt Lewis Jr., with
Joshua, a golden retriever. 'He
lets me know I'm still a human
being,' says Mr. Lewis.

PHOTOS BY MELANIE
STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF



Gloria Stoga conducts a dog-
training class with inmates and
their pups.

PHOTOS BY MELANIE
STETSON FREEMAN -
STAFF

Several of the inmates say the program has also transformed their relationship with the prison staff, and that they feel a new respect being accorded them as a result of their work with the dogs. Many of the guards agree. Having the puppies in the prison "has made this a different place to work," says Lt. Gretta Wilkerson, an officer working at Fishkill. "When you see the dogs walking around you have to smile. It's made us all grow."

Reservations about prison dogs

DOWN AND STAY: Inmates at the Fishkill Correctional Facility, in Peekskill, N.Y., gather twice a week for a group training session with their temporary wards. They will care for and train the future guide dogs for the blind for up to two years before giving them up.

PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF



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Currently, Stoga hopes to increase the number of dogs in Fishkill and Bedford Hills, as well as expand to another New York prison. Many associated with guide-dog users warmly praise the program, although they agree that there are those who have reservations about the concept of dogs in prison, and also warn that in less capable hands than Stoga's, there could be problems. "There were people who felt violently about not wanting prison dogs," admits Jenine Stanley, past president of Guide Dog Users Inc. and a guide-dog user herself. But her own concerns have been quelled by the quality of the dogs PBB has produced.

"All the raisers do a good job, but this is a different caliber of dog coming out of the prison program," says Ms. Stanley. "They're more stable, more well-adjusted. The one-on-one attention they get as they grow up is really valuable."

Judy Goldman, a former nurse living in Pittsburgh, was one of the first guide-dog users to receive a prison-raised dog. She had no idea initially where Lucie, a black Lab, had been raised, but says the dog was a standout from the first day she began working with her. "She was so well-behaved, so obedient," she says. "We began calling her the executive dog because all her moves were so perfect."

When Ms. Goldman learned that Lucie came from Bedford Hills, she arranged a visit to the prison to meet and thank the inmates. "They put a lot of love and care into raising these dogs, and I could just sense that," she says.

She was also touched to realize how much it meant to the inmates to see Lucie excelling at her work. "They're so proud, and they well should be. They do an excellent job," she says.