



AKC GAZETTE

October 2000

By Marilyn Singer

RAISING THE BAR

For the prisoners working with Puppies Behind Bars, a program that matches fledgling guide dogs with inmate dog trainers, the word "correction" has taken on a whole new meaning.

To anyone who's been to obedience school, it is a familiar scene: dogs relaxing on the floor, handlers discussing everything from crate training to microchipping to getting little Alby to sit. It is a familiar scene - but with a big twist. Each one of the confident canines is a Labrador Retriever and every one of the enthusiastic trainers is an inmate at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, the only women's maximum-security prison in New York.

Welcome to Puppies Behind Bars (www.puppiesbehindbars.com), one of several programs around the country in which prisoners convicted of crimes such as robbery, manslaughter and murder raise pups for eventual guide-dog work. For these prisoners, the word correction has taken on a new meaning. "This program goes deep," says Blue, a prisoner at Bedford Hills who is currently raising Winston, her third dog. "You have to confront what got you here in the first place."

"Puppies Behind Bars is amazing," adds fellow inmate Roz. "You build confidence in your dog and you build confidence in yourself. This program has changed my life."

"She's our paid spokesperson," jokes Gloria Gilbert Stoga, and the students laugh. Director, instructor and self-proclaimed tough cookie, Stoga founded Puppies Behind Bars three years ago after training her own Labs, Arrow and Carlos, frequent visitors to the class. She researched similar programs in Florida, Ohio and South Carolina to find out what would work and what could be improved.

At first Stoga encountered skepticism, but she persevered and convinced prison officials that the project was a risk worth taking - one which she says "turned out not to be as risky as they thought." The privately funded program, which also runs at the Fishkill (N.Y.) Correctional Facility, a men's prison, and which Stoga hopes to expand to other prisons, is, by all accounts, an unqualified success. "The inmates in it have calmed down because they're nurturing a life," says Paul White, a corrections officer at Bedford Hills.

To get into the program, prisoners must apply. There is, of course, an intensive screening process. Only "honor" prisoners with clean disciplinary records, at least two years left to serve, and a willingness to work hard are accepted. Once they get in, the puppy-raisers attend twice-weekly classes. There they learn how to train, groom and care for the pups, as well as to deal with a host of issues specific to guide dogs and the blind. They have homework that ranges from the commonplace (reading the puppy-raisers' manual) to the unusual (learning commands in French for dogs that will go to the guide school in France).

Then there are all the hours of feeding, housebreaking, exercising and socializing the potential guide dogs, as well as bolstering their most important asset: confidence. Any activities the inmates can't do with the dogs - taking them on trains, to restaurants and so on - are performed by outside raisers who take the pups for three weekends each month. The inmates spend virtually all their time with the pups. It is a lot of responsibility, and it requires more than a modicum of patience. Yet the drop-out rate is small.

"Since I've been in the program I've learned to think more, not to do things on impulse," says Sheron. It was Sheron's father who encouraged her to take part. "In prison they take everything away from you," he told her. "So work with plants, work with animals to stay healthy." She took his advice and is glad she did.

Blue says there's nothing about the program she would change, but that, like Roz and many others, the program has changed her. "Years ago, on the outside, if my dog messed the house, I'd have pushed his face in it. But now I think that's cruel," says Blue. "You do what you learn. I'd never do that again to any dog."

The dogs in the program are donated by Guiding Eyes for the Blind. They stay with their raisers until they are 16 to 18 months old. About half of them will succeed as guide dogs, while the others will go to families with blind children. This helps the kids decide later whether they want to use a guide dog or a cane. Recently, Lucie, Puppies Behind Bars' first graduate, accompanied by her user Judy, was reunited at Bedford Hills with her raisers Marie and Diana. It was an emotional occasion for everyone.

Is giving up their puppies hard for the raisers? Sure it is. But the inmates have a sense of mission. "They tell themselves, 'I can do it' and 'I did it,'" says Stoga. "They know they're doing something for the community."

"I'm here for the puppies and the community I'm giving back to," agrees puppy-raiser Deb. "I'm honored to be part of this program." The dogs, though they don't realize it, are also honored by having such dedicated, loving caregivers.

Marilyn Singer is the author of the children's book *A Dog's Gotta Do What a Dog's Gotta Do: Dogs at Work*. She trains her standard Poodle in obedience and agility.