



Photo by Edward Osinski

A dog from the Macomb County Animal Shelter gets trained by a resident at the Juvenile Justice Center. The animals are more likely to get adopted after the training.

Dogs, delinquent youth give each other a little TLC

New program at treatment facility a win for both

By Heidi Roman
C & G Staff Writer

Editor's Note: C & G Newspapers is not publishing the identity or ages of Juvenile Justice Center treatment residents involved in the Teacher's Pet program in order to protect their privacy.

MACOMB COUNTY — Both of them come in a little rough around the edges, but after six weeks of working together, troubled youth in the Juvenile Justice Center and feisty dogs from the Macomb County Animal Shelter tend to straighten each other out.

In a new Teacher's Pet program brought to the facility in Mount Clemens, treatment residents take dogs with behavioral problems under their wing to teach basic training commands like sit, stay and come. They end up saving the dogs' lives in the process, since the dogs are more adoptable after graduation.

It's a two-way street, since the trainers get something more positive to focus on than whatever it was that landed them in the joint.

The Juvenile Justice Center on North Rose, which houses youth that are ordered into custody through the court system, implemented the program in May, although it's been run in Oakland

County for years.

Teacher's Pet is a nonprofit organization that was formed in Waterford in 2003. The program is funded by grants and donations, and has grown considerably. Now Teacher's Pet gets all kinds of program requests, which is how it ended up in Macomb County. A group of local officials, animal lovers and county department heads came together to make it happen.

Most of the dogs used in the program wouldn't stand much of a chance getting adopted if they didn't learn a few tricks from the youth.

"They come in with absolutely no manners," said Lisa Rabine, Teacher's Pet program facilitator. "They're barking and jumping all over people."

If they're healthy and pass a temperament test, they get a shot in the program. After six weeks of training two times each week, every single one that's gone through the program has been adopted by the public.

By that time, the dogs have already returned the favor.

"With the kids, the transformation is amazing," Rabine said. "It's a self-esteem and confidence booster. It teaches them responsibility and care and socialization with each other."

The program has given a lot of the youth a reason to turn their lives around. Many express interest in going to college and pursuing a career involving animals once they're released from the center.

"I've been thinking of doing something with dogs, like maybe work in a vet's office," said one teen who has already graduated two dogs, and now acts as a mentor to new youth in the program.

"I've learned to be patient with dogs and with people," he said. "I've learned about how to care for them and about the different breeds."

The training helps the youth focus on something positive and realize they can do good things with their life.

"They start feeling better about themselves, and then they start treating other people better," said Barry Treadwell, the Juvenile Justice Center employee who coordinates the program.

Right now, the program is open to about 15-20 youth in the center, and Treadwell's goal is to eventually allow all of the residents to participate. The kids are chosen because coordinators believe they'd benefit most from the work.

"Walking in here, you can tell everyone's excited," said County Commissioner Carey Torrice, who represents Clinton Township and pushed to have the Teacher's Pet program brought into the county. "They have nice dogs and seem to have it under control."

Treadwell thinks the program is almost ready to expand, and organizers would be more than happy to do so — if they had the funding.

The volunteers' dream is to eventually build a kennel facility nearby or on the Justice Center grounds so that the treatment residents could take over the care, adoption and paperwork for the animals. Treadwell said the more immediate goal is to continue operating the program and offering

it to more youth.

“We’re working with almost nothing (financially), and are just hoping to keep it going,” Treadwell said.

The Teacher’s Pet program relies on volunteers, grants and donations to operate. For information on how to get involved or adopting a dog that’s been through the program, visit www.teacherspetmichigan.org. To donate to the organization, call Amy Johnson at (248) 930-2909.

You can reach Staff Writer Heidi Roman at hroman@candgnews.com or at (586) 218-5006.