



Submitted photo A detainee plays with his trainee dog in the "yard" at the Juvenile Justice Center.

Man's best friend, it turns out, is doggone good at straightening out troubled kids.

A new program at the Macomb County Juvenile Justice Center, called "Teacher's Pet," teams up a juvenile delinquent with a stray dog from the county Animal Shelter. The kids play the role of dog trainer for 13 weeks, and a surprising synergy takes hold.

The youths learn commitment, responsibility, socialization and communication skills. The dogs, who have suffered from abuse or neglect, learn obedience, trust and basic commands like sitting and staying.

Chuck Seidelman, director of the JJC, was reluctant when the program was first proposed earlier this year.

"As I told the county commissioners, I'm not in the dog business," said Seidelman, a veteran juvenile justice administrator. "But ... what we have seen is a major improvement to these kids' lives. It's been very, very positive."

The program is run by Amy Johnson, who devised her Teacher's Pet program several years ago while working at the Michigan Humane Society. The first class at the JJC "graduated" in July — seven youths and 13 dogs — and the next session is slated for September.

"Some of these kids have been told they're worthless, they're scum, they're criminals. But now they have a dog who loves them and loves to see them," said Johnson, 39, a certified dog trainer. "It gives them self-esteem. It makes them feel important."

In the end, the kids embrace a new attitude that gives them a better shot at succeeding outside the walls of the detention facility. The dogs are transformed from unruly or traumatized animals to pets that are easy to put up for adoption.

In nearly all cases, Johnson said, the dogs who graduate from the program are adopted and saved from likely euthanasia at the shelter.

"These kids save the lives of these dogs. Absolutely," Johnson said.

The dogs in the program are a mix — terriers, shepherds, Labradors, even a pit bull. The kids in the program are associated with violent felonies, mental and behavioral problems and substance abuse.

Though the detainees, especially the boys, are "some of the most serious offenders in the building," Seidelman said, the kids become attached to their assigned dog and some shed a few tears when saying goodbye to their furry friend on the final day of the program.

Johnson has seen similar emotions at other facilities — a humane response that shows they "still have a heart, still have a chance."

She started her program five years ago at a Waterford reform school and now also works with two Detroit area youth homes.

She and her associate, Lisa Rabine, tell the story of one girl who entered the program but insisted that she didn't like dogs. After four weeks, her introverted, irksome personality was converted. She became a laughing, joking girl, one of those graduates who "have a glow about them," Rabine said.

Other grads have talked about completing their court-mandated community service at an animal shelter. Some want to adopt a dog of their own when their detention is done. One youth said he has decided to pursue a career working with animals, perhaps in veterinary medicine.

The JJC program is assisted by Barry Treadwell, an employee at the center who gave up his job as an auto industry engineer to work with at-risk kids. With his help, the center has created kennels and a dog run in the detention facility's "yard" to accommodate the program.

The kids split their time between the classroom, learning about proper care for animals, and the yard, engaging in hands-on communication with their four-legged pals. Man and canine benefit from parallel lessons in how to read body language and how to deal with emotions, stress, anger and stubbornness.

After working with more than 100 juveniles in Teacher's Pet programs, Johnson said she has never experienced a youth mistreating a dog.

The program is funded by grants and donors and, except for a small monthly stipend paid to Rabine, is conducted by volunteers and presents no cost to Macomb County. It is run by a non-profit organization that Johnson formed in 2003.

Teacher's Pet is based on similar programs across the nation. They are the outgrowth of a much larger movement that relies upon animals to improve treatment and care at nursing homes, counseling centers, physical therapy clinics, hospices and hospitals.

Johnson, who holds master's degrees in teaching and counseling, has created a 40-hour online course in animal-assisted therapy for the Oakland University School of Nursing.

An employee at the School of Nursing, Johnson is given some leeway by the dean to devote sufficient time to maintain her Teacher's Pet programs.

"It is the best feeling in the entire world to see the kids and dogs interact," she said. "It ... is just magic."

For more information about the program, log onto teacherspetmichigan.org.