



LET'S PAWTY



At-risk youth and shelter dogs are getting second chances through a collaboration between OC Probation, OC Animal Care and nonprofit Cell Dogs Inc.

A decade ago, Cell Dogs Executive Director Janette Thomas approached OC Probation with an idea to help shelter dogs and youth in juvenile facilities learn to be better citizens. Over roughly 12 weeks, youth would train the dogs in preparation of being adopted.

Cell Dogs has a list of 22 commands for the dogs to learn. The youth focus on three or four each week; teaching the dogs good manners, a few tricks, agility and more.

"This provides good focus for both the youth and the dogs," Janette says. The program teaches the youth compassion, responsibility and good housekeeping skills as the dogs live in the units with them. The youth learn firsthand what owning a pet entails; including cleaning kennels and supplies, filling bowls with food and water, and grooming.

"Some come into the program thinking it will be a breeze," Janette says, adding that at the end of each session, once the dogs have graduated, the youth also have matured. "They start making eye contact and smiling more. Their tempers don't flair as much. It's just so transformational." That transformation spreads to youth not in the program, as they don't want their unit to lose the privilege of having the dogs around. The dogs become part of the family unit, wandering around during movie nights in search of idle ear scratches and pets.

About 90 percent of the dogs in the program come from OC Animal Care. The only real restriction involves the

inability to include bully breeds due to liability issues. Dogs ranging in age from 9 months to 12 years and as small as 10 pounds to as large as 118 pounds have been in the program. They must be amenable to people and other dogs. "You could have a dog who is amazing one on one with a person, but gets grumpy over food, toys and attention around other dogs," Janette says. "Unfortunately, we cannot include dogs who engage in resource guarding."

"OC Animal Care has been extremely supportive," Janette says. She's worked with them for 13 years, adopting dogs for the Orange County program, as well as programs through the state. OC Animal Care has also helped get the word out for pups awaiting adoption. Probation staff have adopted 15 percent of the graduates and another 12 percent have gone on to be therapy and service dogs. "I've watched shelter dogs given an opportunity to transform," says OC Animal Care Public Information Officer Jessica Novillo. "This program touches and changes lives."

At an October event at OC Animal Care's shelter to celebrate 10 years of success, Chief Probation Officer Steven J. Sentman said, "Many of the youth don't understand relationships with dogs, but they express natural skills and talent in this rehabilitative process."

So far, 60 dogs and more than 100 at-risk youth have been in the program. For more information about Cell Dogs, visit their Facebook page.