

SECOND CHANCES

BY PATTY MAHONEY 10/17/2023



BISHOP VANN'S DOGS, GRACIE AND GRIFFIN, ARE PICTURED AT BISHOP'S HOME. PHOTO BY RENNE ENRIQUEZ/DIOCESE OF ORANGE

Bishop Kevin Vann has been a dog lover since his childhood days in Springfield, Illinois.



BISHOP VANN SPENDS TIME WITH HIS TWO DOGS, GRACIE AND GRIFFIN, AT HOME ON SEPT. 6. PHOTOS BY RENNE ENRIQUEZ/DIOCESE OF ORANGE

“We were primarily dog people,” said Bishop Vann of his family.

Over the years, the Vanns took in strays and adopted dogs into their family.

“My sister loved dogs,” he said of his late sister, Mary Therese Vann, who passed away in 2016.

At one point, “M.T.,” as she was lovingly referred to, had four of them.

She had suggested to her brother that he get a dog as well.

At that time, in 2013, the Diocese of Orange offices were located close to the Orange County Animal Shelter in Orange, so Bishop Vann stopped by one day for a visit.

It was a rainy day when Janette Thomas, director of Cell Dogs, spotted him getting into his car.



BISHOP VANN'S DOG GRIFFIN GETS PLAYFUL AT HOME ON SEPT. 6. PHOTOS BY RENNE ENRIQUEZ/DIOCESE OF ORANGE

Cell Dogs was founded in 2000 and Thomas took over in 2007, after running a similar organization out in Temecula for a number of years.

The program takes dogs from area shelters and brings them into correctional institutions for incarcerated adults and the youth at juvenile hall to train.

Originally, the program focused its efforts in Orange, Riverside and L.A. counties. After the pandemic, it changed the focus area to only Orange County. The program currently works with the OC Sheriff's department for the county jails and Orange County Probation which has responsibility for juvenile hall.

The training classes are held at the institutions and during the period of training, which takes between 8 to 10 weeks, the dogs live with the inmates.

Thomas had just come out of the shelter that day after selecting dogs for the program when she saw Bishop Vann.

A parishioner of Purísima parish in Orange, Thomas recognized him immediately and knocked on his car window.

“I asked him if I could help, and that is how the journey started,” Thomas recalled.



BISHOP KEVIN VANN AND HIS DOG GRACIE, A COCKER SPANIEL HE ADOPTED IN 2015.

Bishop Vann told her he was interested in adopting a dog and “that was pretty much putting the flag in the ground, and it has grown ever since,” she said.

According to Thomas, Bishop was looking for a buddy and just fell in love with the endearing look of Griffin, a Lhasa Apso/Terrier mix from behind bars at the shelter. In 2015, Bishop adopted his second dog through Thomas, a Cocker Spaniel named Gracie.

Bishop Vann's father, William Vann, passed away in November of 2014, and Bishop had traveled back home to Springfield for his funeral. Upon his return, Bishop paid a visit to the animal shelter.

"I found Gracie," he said. "She came right to the front of the cage."

Bishop Vann officially adopted Gracie in February of 2015.

Bishop said his two dogs, though they have different temperaments, get along really well.

"Gracie is really sweet, she's a love bug," he said.

"Griffin is good, he's like the protector."

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

The recipe for Cell Dogs is national, according to Thomas, and there are similar programs all over the country.

"The purpose is to offer second chances to amazing dogs that people decide they don't want for one reason or another — either bad behavior, lack of training or all of the above," she said. "The same is true for the kids at juvenile hall who I work with. Lack of structure, lack of respect, lack of love — all of these things are a crossover between the youth and the dogs and that's why they are incarcerated and the dogs, impounded."

Thomas has been doing this a long time. She had a different profession way back when but reinvented herself because she had a passion to work with animals and people.

"The incarcerated get an opportunity to give these dogs another chance at a loving home and it gives them the skills that they didn't have prior to being in the program," she added.

The rates of euthanasia at shelters are exceedingly high because of overpopulation due to people getting dogs during the pandemic and then going back to work and deciding they can't have them or don't want them anymore.

"There's lots of great dogs that just need someone to love them," emphasized Thomas.

Since Cell Dog programs are privately funded, donors and benefactors are always needed.

Cell Dogs is also always looking for fosters to house dogs pulled from shelters prior to being placed in the training programs. To learn more, call 714-747-6782 or visit <https://www.celldogs.org/>