

Herald&Review

Here's how Decatur prison's grooming program pampers pets, helps rebuild lives

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DECATUR — At 19, Rock is old in dog years, but he is still lovable. The pit bull-Doberman mix dog is owned by Kim Schwalbach, who adopted him from the Macon County Animal Shelter 17 years ago.

“Rocky was in a bad place,” she said. “He was considered unadoptable. He was pretty aggressive and rowdy.”

Schwalbach's compassion for animals, which includes another 19-year-old dog named Roxy, spreads into the human world as well. In 2002, Schwalbach established the Correctional Ladies Improving Pets, or CLIP, at the Decatur Correctional Center. As a dog groomer for nearly 40 years, she understands what it takes to work with dogs as well as customers, families and future groomers.

According to Schwalbach, the taking care of pets professionally requires more than just teaching how to trim hair and nails.

“I work according to the National Dog Grooming guidelines,” she said. “I certify according to them.”

The process for receiving a certification can take 12 to 14 months, “but that is part time,” Schwalbach said. Two to three days a week, a small group of inmates meets as part of the CLIP program.

One of the students is Angela Little. The 42-year-old inmate hopes to complete her sentence by 2024. Her time training to be a dog groomer helps relieve some of the stress of incarceration, she said.

“I know I have some time to master some stuff,” she said.

She hopes to be a therapy dog trainer.

“I thought about starting in a shelter,” Little said. “I know what it’s like to feel locked away like nobody wants you.”

Cara Quiet, 38, will be going home to the northern Illinois city of Homer Glen in a month. She is hoping to find work as a dog groomer.

“I’ve learned more than I ever could have imagined about dogs,” she said.

“(Schwalbach) wants to give us everything she can to help us.”

Decatur Correctional Center Warden Jane Moskus said finding a job after being released from prison is one of the most important factors in preventing a person's return.

“If they can’t make a living wage and actually support themselves and their families, that is a big factor in whether or not they come back to us,” she said.

“With this, they are getting a career.”

The students are allowed to stay in the program until they are released from the facility. As the date gets closer, they can apply to be a certified dog groomer.

“But we do testing and continue working with dogs the entire time we’re here,” Little said. “That is so you don’t lose some of that testing, so it is fresh while you are walking outside the door.”

Schwalbach brings the animals to a room set up to teach the students dog grooming services. The various dogs are allowed to be groomed, including shelter dogs, correctional staff family dogs, service dogs and purebred dogs. Schwalbach retrieves the dogs from their homes and transports them to the correctional facility.

“The dogs love it here,” Schwalbach said. “I think it is because the ladies are safe and so kind and gentle with them. None of us are heavy handed.”

Safety is the biggest concern for the groomer and the dog. The students are taught all aspects of the dog grooming business. They must learn all of the American Kennel Club breeds as well as mix breeds. They also have to understand the importance of the dog’s history, the owner’s background and customer service.

“She is teaching us how to communicate and work as a business,” Little said. “It’s not just about cutting.”

Little completed an apprenticeship, called Helping PAWS, while she was an inmate at the Logan County Correctional Center. As a trainer, she taught dogs how to help people with disabilities. She said grooming adds a different element in caring for a dog, but she can include her previous training while preparing to be a dog groomer.

“Our energy and inner self can be used to connect with the dog,” Little said. “It’s not as easy as just taking clippers and cutting their nails.”

Like people, every dog is different. The students learn how to communicate with each one accordingly.

“They are just like kids,” Little said. “What you do with one, you can’t necessarily do with the others.”

Dogs are not the only animals to get special treatment. Other pets have included pigs, rabbits, sheep and a rat.

The program has even been trusted to groom an award-winning show dog. “He wins every time we groom him,” Schwalbach said.

Lindsey Hess, public information adviser for Illinois Department of Corrections, said the goal of CLIP is to improve the inmate’s chances at a positive outcome after they leave the correctional center.

“This program provides valuable skills that these ladies can use when obtaining a job,” she said. “We’ve had an almost 100 percent job placement rate through this program.”

https://herald-review.com/news/local/here-s-how-decatur-prison-s-grooming-program-pampers-pets/article_29831ac1-e51d-52e8-b858-37761ec853b7.html