



Courthouse Canines You Gotta Lov''em, It's the Law



By Janice Arenofsky
Photo by Becky Snodgrass

Chance's big brown eyes latched onto those of Child Protective Services employee Becky Snodgrass. The San Antonio, Texas, woman wondered if Bexar County's 10-year-old courthouse canine was sulking about a grooming mistake that had mowed down Chance's way mane of reddish-brown hair to crew-cut length.

But no, the Golden Retriever bounded out of the car and began making friends with a group of sexually- and physically -abused children preparing to be witnesses for the prosecution.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Chance belongs to an elite group of facility dogs in the U.S. Judicial System. As a "courtroom dog" - a term coined by Ellen O'Neill-Stephens, a senior prosecutor in Seattle, Washington - Chance and other assistance dogs in Maryland, Florida, and Washington State help victims of crime cope with the criminal justice system. With the cooperation of non-profit certifying organizations such as Canine Companions for Independence, Therapy Dogs International, and Delta - which donate the trained canines - courtroom dogs calm children and reduce panic. Their nonthreatening presence allows children to testify truthfully, distracts them from the feeling of victimization, and re-establishes a trusting relationship.

"The dogs ease stress and make it easier for us all to do a better job in a kinder fashion," says O'Neill-Stephens, the King County, Washington, attorney who launched the program in 2003. Four Golden Retriever-Labrador mixes "Jeeter," "Stilson," "Ellie," and "Astro" assist crime victims, drug court defendants, juvenile and mental health court detainees, and jurors. O'Neill-Stephens says many out-of-state criminal justice agencies inquire about the program, which gained legitimacy from a precedent-making 1989 sexual abuse case of an eight-year-old who testified that holding a doll "comforted" her. O'Neill-Stephens argued that facility dogs also are "comfort items."

INTUITIVE POWERS

Although stress relief - especially in a child - is no small thing, the dogs possess another skill, say program participants. The canines intuit the optimal level of affection or comfort that the witnesses can tolerate. For instance, O'Neill-Stephens interviewed a middle-aged female attorney with a history of sexual abuse. Since Jeeter's behavioral repertoire varies according to other people's emotional temperatures - ranging from a low-keyed elbow nudge or a head nestled on a lap to a more demonstrative display of affection such as kisses, a wagging tail, and playful postures - the witness, who actually feared dogs, appreciated Jeeter's subtle "support" message communicated by bumping her shoe periodically with his nose.

REGAINING TRUST

"Children are reticent to testify against their abusers, and for good reason," says Andrea Lockhart, professional sexual assault counselor, founder of FLA (Four Legged Advocates, Inc.) in Polk County, Florida, and winner of the 2008 Professional Innovation in Victim Services Award. Children fear not only their abusers'

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legal consequences but also the notion of trusting another person (such as a prosecutor) with their "secret." That's why dogs like "Squiggly," a Golden Retriever- Lab mix, serve such a vital purpose. "Dogs remain nonjudgmental and noncoercive," says Lockhart. "The kids [who testify] know they have done the best they can and that testifying is the last step."

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Sometimes the entire family feels victimized. King County, Washington, victim advocate Heidi Potter recalls how, during court proceedings, "Stilson" calmed the relatives of a 17-year-old runaway who was tortured and murdered by two associates. Says Potter: "The family got down in his [Stilson's] face, ruffled up his ears and told him what a good boy he was."

Maryland's "Buddy," a young black Newfoundland-Lab mix, has a similar effect, Amy Blank Ocampo, a senior assistant state's attorney in Carroll County explains that Buddy allays the misgivings of parents of sexually assaulted children who must testify.

Parents see that prosecutors are doing everything possible "not to revictimize" the children.

SAFE HARBOR

Courthouse dogs also function as safe harbors or as barriers between the victims and forbidden territory. For instance, Amanda Harpell, a child interview specialist in the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office in Everett, Washington, recounts how a 12-year-old Native American who was molested by an older cousin needed to disengage physically and emotionally from certain interview questions that evoked personal shame. Also, the cultural heritage valued a no-eyecontact, "save-face," attitude. When the boy volunteered the specifics of the abuse, he moved Stilson positionally so as to separate himself from the interviewer. "Stilson seemed to provide a barrier between the child and me and [added] a sense of safety," Harpell said.

THE HUMAN(E) CONDITION

In similar fashion, but with a criminal population, programs in Ocean County, New Jersey, and in Bernalillo County, New Mexico, nurture the softer side of juveniles incarcerated for felonies and other offenses. Jeanne Richards, who directs Ocean County's program, says that in the past the youths detested dogs. But after multiple visits with Richards' two 100-pound Rottweilers, "Lady McDuff "(Miss Duffy) and "Pippin," the juveniles begin to respect dogs for their capacity to express affection and obey commands. New detainees often hear others say, "You will show her respect" (referring to Miss Duffy). One former detainee returned soldier elected to work with dogs in the Middle East.

BONDS THAT BRING CHANGE

Occasionally, the child-canine bonds have life-changing effects, as in the case of a 13-year-old cocaine user and auto thief in Washington State. Under a special Drug Court program, the juvenile received inpatient treatment but always relapsed. Her felonies would not be expunged, the Drug Court team told her. On hearing that, the young woman hugged Jeeter, sobbing and pleading for one more chance.

"We were so moved that we put our best judgment aside and agreed..." O'Neill-Stephens says. Four years passed and the prosecutor bumped into the teenager, who by then was employed and had reconciled with her family. Without hesitation, the young woman said, "Jeeter saved my life."

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