

Fences for Fido's co-founder Kelly Peterson spends a moment with Biaggi, who spent 13 years on an 8-foot chain before the group built him a new fence.



Building a Way Off the Chain

In the Pacific Northwest, good neighbors make good fences

BY JANICE ARENOFSKY

Winter or summer, in good weather or bad, Fences for Fido (FFF) puts up fences.

But the Portland, Ore.-based animal nonprofit with chapters in Washington state is actually *removing* barriers by doing so, giving families who previously chained their dogs access to a better option for the animals.

Take the work the group did for “the Railroad Five,” a group of four pit bull mixes and one cattle dog, so nicknamed for their proximity to train tracks in Aurora, Ore. After more than five years on chains in an isolated backyard with no shelter from the elements, on a rainy day in November 2011, their time on the chain gang came to an end. Twenty volunteers who’d spent the past three hours putting up a fence for the dogs stood in the

cold backyard and cheered as they watched several of the railroad pups joyfully dashing around their new enclosure. In a matter of a few hours, they had gained increased freedom and quality of life, when 18 days before—despite the fact that one dog had only three legs, another dog was pregnant, and all five dogs were starved for affection—the family said they did not want a fence.

Yet after FFF outreach volunteers forged a bond with the family and gained their trust, the dogs’ family “went from complete resistance to cautious acceptance,” says Kelly Peterson, co-founder of FFF. Peterson attributes this to the group’s nonjudgmental attitude. “There are a lot of complicated factors that go into families feeling that

chaining is their only option. Most times chaining is a last resort for people, so we accept those circumstances and want to be a catalyst for change.”

In fact, change has been the one constant for the 2,000 supporters and donors (and 8,000 Facebook fans) of the all-volunteer organization founded by several Portland women in May 2009. “Our initial, modest goal was to change the life of one dog per month,” says Peterson, adding that the idea sprang from seeing a video about the accomplishments of the Coalition to Unchain Dogs in Durham, N.C.

Within a few months, FFF was surpassing its goal and attracting a substantial following. FFF now has four Northwest chapters

and builds eight to 10 fences every month. FFF has financed and constructed fences for some 360 dogs, the majority of them pit bulls and other large breeds such as rottweilers, Labradors, shepherds, and huskies.

"It's a win-win situation," says Keith Lambe, whose Lab mix Chopper was one of the early recipients of a welded wire fence. Although Lambe says he was initially skeptical that the group could get the job done, he was pleasantly surprised. "It was a 100 percent positive experience for Chopper and me," he says. "The design was well-thought-out and cost-effective."

That's because volunteers take their fence construction duties seriously, including a start-to-finish completion time of three to four hours. Before their tools come out, they have filed the required notices, such as county permits and notifications to utility companies and liability insurers. Although a few "Houdinis" have escaped after fences went up, says Peterson, such cases are rare. "We use ground wire along the fence line to prevent our dogs from digging out," she says, admitting that three years ago, she couldn't tell a wire cutter from a pair of pliers. "We ask owners lots of questions about the personalities of their dogs to avoid problems."



Lexy, a 2-year-old pit bull in Gervais, Ore., and her brother Bruno used to be chained separately, but they are now living happily together in a fenced enclosure built by Fences for Fido.

A neighbor informed FFF of Chopper's need for a fence, but clients also come from other sources, such as owner self-referral and networking from partner organizations like the Oregon Humane Society and Multnomah County Animal Services. "Portland is an urban area, and when dogs are loose, it can be dangerous," says Mike Oswald, director of animal services for Multnomah County. Oswald regularly refers urgent cases, and cases involving ordinance violations, to FFF. "We help people succeed in keeping their dogs by making it conditional upon their getting or fixing a fence," Oswald says.

Replacing dog chains with good fences minimizes problems for dog owners and communities alike, says Oswald. One case in point is Oso, a 127-pound Rottweiler. A stranger trespassed into Martin Arellano's backyard in Hubbard, Ore., and unhooked Oso's chain, loosing a dog who might be perceived as threatening into the neighborhood. Peterson had happened by Arellano's house due to a caring neighbor's email report on Oso filed two days before. Peterson spent a half hour helping Arellano locate his dog, after which she suggested a fence.

"He's a gentle giant," says Arellano, referring to his companion and his habit of roaming at will when the family lived on a farm. Since January when the fence went up and Oso got off his chain, he's morphed from lethargic to energetic.

The majority of supplies, such as cedar posts and welded wire, are donated to FFF or discounted significantly by Home Depot to around \$400 to \$600 per fence, provided the materials are purchased in high volume. "It's a gift we give to these families," Peterson says.

The fences not only help to contain dogs and provide them with exercise room, but also safeguard them from other animals and likely decrease the number of biting cases and unwanted litters of puppies. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control reports that chained dogs are nearly three times more likely to bite than unchained dogs.

"A dog on a 2-foot chain tied to a tree will develop a spiritually broken personality," says Wendy Reimer, investigator for the Oregon Humane Society. On average, Reimer refers one chained dog case per week to FFF, and applauds the group's fast response time and compassion. "They're saving lives."

FFF doesn't stop at fences. It also donates all-weather dog houses and, at times, temporary zip lines for dogs on the waiting list for a fence (outreach coordinators prioritize emergency situations, such as a dog with inconsistent access to food and water, or a pet who's outside 24 hours a day). Depending on circumstances, clients may receive critical vet care and spay/neuter services. Volunteers return for twice-yearly follow-up visits to check on fence safety and monitor changes in animal-owner relationships, such as stronger bonds due to increased interaction. Some dogs even get promoted to life indoors.

The example of FFF and the Coalition to Unchain Dogs has inspired other groups around the country, among them Freedom Fences (Anderson, S.C.), Unchain Charleston (S.C.), and Habitat for Hounds (Lansing, Mich.). More than 40 out-of-state requests for startup information have resulted in FFF issuing a manual and scheduling conference calls to mentor other groups.

FFF volunteers believe their work has improved the lives of many dogs and their families, says Peterson, who holds a full-time position as vice president of state affairs for The HSUS. Actually, her dual animal-caring roles—"at both a macro and a micro level"—give her "the best of both worlds," she says. For instance, without guidance from The HSUS and the Coalition to Unchain Dogs, FFF would not have gotten off the ground, and Peterson would not have been able to assist Biaggi, a dog who spent 13 years on an 8-foot chain before FFF changed his life with a new fence. "That moment of gratitude—when we locked eyes and [Biaggi] leaned his head on my hand—will always stay with me." ■

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