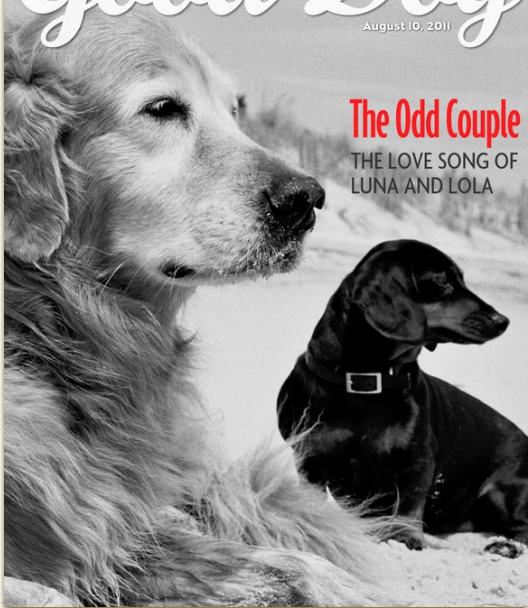


# Nomad Editions Good Dog

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## The Odd Couple

THE LOVE SONG OF  
LUNA AND LOLA



BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

# INMATES

Perps find a  
supportive ear in  
the four-legged

In 2007, a 42-year-old woman was incarcerated at a Utah state prison and placed directly into the mental health inpatient program. She had been in and out of prison on drug and prostitution charges most of her life. As a child the woman had been a victim of sexual and physical abuse; she'd dropped out of school at age 12 and begun working the streets to support a drug habit.

Now, she faced up to five years in prison. At the start, she participated only nominally in both individual and group therapy sessions. She made eye contact infrequently, and her treatment progressed slowly. Then, six months after she arrived, she met someone who changed her life.

A social work intern named Rachael Jasperson—curious about how dogs could help prisoners—researched the topic and set up an animal-assisted therapy (AAT) pilot program through the



**Buck's ID, with photo, just in case.**



**Handlers Troy Trusley, Blue, Alexander Cook, Calvin Norwood and Brewster. MICHAEL KLOTH**

NOMAD EDITIONS GOOD DOG

prison’s mental health department. The trial employed a certified therapy dog – a standard poodle named Buck – to help inmates reach therapeutic and educational goals.

Before long, the woman started opening up about her past abuse. She was less withdrawn, and began participating in activities such as card tournaments, and attending community meetings. Jasperson said the change was remarkable: When asked what accounted for her transformation, the inmate replied, “It’s Buck. He gave me hope.”

Across the country, prisons and jails offer a variety of programs that involve dogs, but the AAT group Jasperson initiated at the women’s prison in Draper, Utah, seems to be unique. Not only have the dogs been trained to be tools in the offenders’ therapy, but the participants’ progress has been documented and evaluated against a control group.



**Soft cell: Blue with handler Cook visit patient Gibson Henderson, left.** MICHAEL KLOTH



**Down time: Handler Trusley and Blue with patient David McGuire.**

evaluated against a control group.

Jasperson, who detailed the pilot in her dissertation, saw significant changes in the women — findings that support earlier research showing the positive effect of AAT with psychiatric populations.

After her internship, Jasperson was hired full-time at the prison, and in her three years there as a social worker, she led semi-regular social skills and grief groups. Each group ran eight weeks and included a dog and volunteer handler provided by Intermountain Therapy Animals in Salt Lake City. Canines traditionally used in the prison system for security or drug searches — German shepherds, Doberman Pinschers, and pit bulls — aren't allowed because the stigma associated with these breeds might bring up psychological issues for the participants.

In the social skills group, Jasperson found



**Trusley and Blue, right, visit Wallace Nolen in prison's assisted living unit.**



**The Buck stops here: Outside the prison gates.**

benefits were less pronounced with the general prison population than with women who struggled with serious mental illness (i.e., schizophrenia and



bipolar disorder). She also reported that AAT was more beneficial in groups where the women discussed emotionally charged topics, of which there is no shortage behind bars. "There's a ton of trauma in the female prison population," she said, noting that about 80 percent of incarcerated women have been victims of sexual or physical abuse. Yet even when exploring less emotional issues such as boundaries, safety, trust, and coping, dogs can be integral in group settings. "Most people in prison are there for drug-related offenses, and most people who use drugs have poor coping skills," Jasperson said.

In one session addressing boundaries, Buck's owner and handler, Ann Coleman, sat with Jasperson and eight inmates on the floor in a circle, while Buck sat in the center. He would walk over to individual women to offer affection and often acted as a model or facilitator.

"Rachael would say, 'Ann, what are some of Buck's boundaries?' and I'd say he doesn't like having his feet touched," said Coleman. She would then touch Buck's paw a few times and he repeatedly pulled it back, which led to a dialogue about what would happen if Coleman kept touching his paw and how to recognize and communicate boundaries. "A week later, Rachael would say, 'OK, what's a boundary?' and they would say, 'Oh yeah, it's Buck not wanting his feet touched.'"

The handlers provide an unintentional benefit in the form of a non-therapist who can set an example for the women. "I think sometimes I act as a role model for what's normal," said Patrice Mealey, who volunteers in the groups with her miniature Australian shepherd, Sid. "I can give examples of how I deal with stress, or strategies that are helpful in relationships — things I do that don't lead

to a crime."

Her primary role, though, is that of an advocate for Sid. She talks to the women about expectations and how Sid needs to be treated. "I tell them if he gets up and leaves the circle because he needs a break, you need to let him. We have to respect his boundaries. It sounds basic, but we need to talk about that."

Both Mealey and Coleman said they were taken aback the first time they volunteered at the prison. With all the locked doors, ID checks, escorts, and prison garb that spell "inmate," they couldn't ignore the fact that the women in their circles were criminals. Yet the dogs simply saw them as humans to sniff and comfort, and in no time, the women adopted similar attitudes (absent the sniffing).

"I hardly even notice that they are inmates now," Coleman said. "You're with a bunch of women who have problems."

Among their problems is what can sometimes be an overwhelming sense of grief—these women have lost families, relationships, jobs, identities, freedom, and sometimes pets. Having an animal present allows them to open up and be vulnerable without being judged. “The women don’t touch or hug our staff or each other, and comfort from another person is incredibly limited,” said Marcie Remington, the prison’s mental health program administrator. “So in the grief group, when they’re talking about trauma, we utilize the dog to be that living being that can soothe them. The dog has a sixth sense, where he recognizes a group member needs some extra attention. You’ll watch him walk over to that person, and they’ll break into tears and will open up. Having that attention from the dog makes them realize their feelings matter.” Sometimes the relief is palpable. Women

realize their feelings matter.” Sometimes the relief is palpable. Women will start stroking the dog while they’re talking about a difficult subject, and end up petting him furiously. But with time, their anxiety is diffused into the fur and they begin petting him more rhythmically, sometimes crying. Afterwards, the pup may step outside the circle to decompress. For many inmates, Remington said, the dog’s love is the only caring they will get. Even sex offenders who join the group (participants need approval from the warden and assurance that there will be no risk to the animals) need physical contact. “We think everything in their nature is sexual,” Remington said. “But if they find out their mother just died, their desire for a hug is not from a sexual urge; it’s because they want to be comforted. An animal can be seen as a safe venue for them.”

Despite the positive effects of AAT at the prison, community feedback has been largely negative, including comments that the inmates are undeserving and the program is a wasted resource. “Unfortunately, there’s a pervasive mentality of ‘Lock ‘em up, throw away the key,’” Remington said. “There’s a lack of understanding that most people who go to prison don’t have life sentences, and they’ll end up back in the community, so the role of therapy will make them better citizens. We’re trying to deal with their issues to reduce recidivism.” Jaspersen held one eight-week AAT group in the state’s men’s facility, but it wasn’t continued because of staffing shortages (which also keep the women’s program from expanding). She found the sessions with the men to be especially poignant. “You saw this almost childlike giddiness that comes from a normal

human social need of physical contact,” Jasperson said. “Petting the dog, hugging the dog, playing with the dog — it was so powerful in the male population.”

Coleman said no matter where women are, they build a community and become friends, but she didn’t sense that with the men. “I think for them to have something to love on was even more important,” she said. She had reservations about bringing a poodle into a group of male prisoners, but they ended up being more affectionate than the women. By the end of the eight weeks, the men were in tears.

Prison dog-training programs don’t involve formal therapy like Jasperson’s groups, but are still beneficial — certainly for the pups but also for the inmates. As one prison system employee said, “It’s great — you’re giving socially inappropriate animals to socially inappropriate humans.” Behind bars, the

inappropriate humans.” Behind bars, the offenders teach homeless hounds basic skills that improve their chances of finding a permanent home. Tending to the pups teaches inmates responsibility and social skills. Some programs, like Operation Second Chance at the Gwinnett County Jail in Georgia, save lives with each trainee — the strays had been on death row, in line for euthanasia at their local shelter.

In New England, more than a dozen correctional centers have partnered with National Education for Assistance Dog Services (NEADS), which provides assistance canines to wounded veterans, disabled and autistic children, and people who are deaf or have hearing loss. The program began in 1998 and today, more than 90 percent of NEADS’s dogs are trained through its Prison PUP Partnership. The programs are funded exclusively by donations and grants.

NEADS reports that mutts trained by inmates complete the required advanced training in half the time needed for those raised exclusively in foster homes, because inmates have more free time and consequently provide more consistent training. The prisons often experience a reduction in violence, infractions, and overall negative behavior among the inmates. And the psychological benefits, albeit anecdotal, are considerable.

“The correctional officers talk about a level of humanity that exists within the walls that did not exist before the dogs came in,” said John Moon, director of programs and communications for Princeton, Massachusetts-based NEADS. He said it also serves as a motivational tool for those who aren’t part of the program, since so many want to work with the dogs. Only the best-behaved inmates are selected for the 12- to 18-

month job.

At Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell, Washington, home to 2,400 male prisoners, Correctional Program Manager Rick Karten decided this spring to experiment with expanding its training program. He suggested that two of the trained dogs that hadn't been adopted become bona fide prison pups, charged with visiting the 55 inmates in the assisted-living area. The unit houses older inmates who may be confined to a wheelchair or walker, or need assistance with administering medication. Over several months, Karten planned the program and prepared the dogs and inmates for its launch.

"We did three trial runs. The dogs did great, and the offenders did great," Karten said on the inaugural day of the program, in mid-July. "I've been doing this for 30 years now, and it was great to see the expression on the offenders'

faces — some of whom have been in [the system] for 10 or 20 years."

The companion dogs assigned to the unit are a blue-nosed pit bull named Blue and Brewster, a beagle mix. Every day they walk with their inmate handlers to the unit, visiting as many offenders as they can in common areas, private cells and military-style barracks.

Karten said one inmate is bedridden and hasn't talked or moved in a year, but he repositioned himself to pet Blue during one of the trial runs. In another area of the unit, Blue walked with Karten and his handler along one of the tiers. When they asked an offender in his mid-60s if he wanted to pet Blue, the man barked a refusal. Yet he watched the pit bull walk down the tier to visit another inmate. When the trio passed this man's cell again and repeated the question, the answer, again, was a gruff "No." Third time was the charm, as the man

had a change of heart. "OK." He bent down and began petting Blue. When he stood up, his expression had changed. He glanced at Karten and the inmate. A trace of a smile passed across his face and he said, "Thank you." ■