

Prison Tails Project – Rachel Goldstein



On June 21, 2006, I packed up my parents' minivan and began the journey from my home in St. Louis, MO to semi-rural Northwest Indiana where I would spend the next two months working with homeless dogs and their inmate-handlers through the Prison Tails program. This was a bold move for me and I felt both excitement and trepidation. It quickly became apparent that this was to be one of the most challenging, liberating and rewarding experiences of my life.

Prison Tails was born out of a collaboration between Westville Correctional Center, a medium-security, male facility, and Mixed Up Mutts, a rescue group that provides dogs whose days are numbered in area animal shelters with a second, or sometimes a third or fourth, chance at finding a good home. Each inmate/handler spends at least eight weeks matched with one of these dogs. During that time, the handlers assume sole responsibility for the training, grooming, and basic care of their dog. Handlers also attend classes taught by Mixed Up Mutts' dedicated volunteers on topics ranging from obedience training to canine health to public speaking and starting a dog-related business. By the end of the eight-week session, almost all of the dogs pass the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen test, and many are adopted into loving homes.

As an intern with the Prison Tails program, I assumed several duties. I organized and facilitated a weekly book group with several of the inmates to promote critical thinking and respectful debate. I encouraged the men to identify and challenge assumptions in the books and articles they read about dog training and in their own thinking, and it was gratifying to see many of them grapple with the various approaches we encountered in our reading. Some of them concluded, for example, that they had been relying too much on physical force to elicit a desired behavior from their dogs. After reading about and critiquing several theories of training, these men independently began to experiment with different methods and to approach their dogs with more compassion and respect. It is my hope that some of the skills and insights that the book group helped generate will translate into healthier attitudes towards key relationships in the men's lives, making them better parents, partners, coworkers, and friends.

I was also responsible for reading and responding to the daily journals the handlers keep on their dogs' body language. This provided me with an opportunity to work individually with each of the 18 handlers and to demonstrate interest in and respect for their observations and opinions. Like book group, it also allowed me to share some of the critical thinking skills I have acquired during my time at Princeton.

During my internship, I also served as an important link between the dog handlers and the greater community. Many of the handlers were deeply concerned that their dogs find good homes and had experienced the frustration and heartbreak when families adopted dogs from the program, only to return them with seemingly petty complaints. As hard as they worked to train

their dogs, the handlers had virtually no control over their dogs' futures after the program. Therefore, it was very important to me to work with the inmates to brainstorm ideas to facilitate adoptions. The inmates, of course, could not leave the facility, but I could serve as their representative in the community, implementing their ideas. The men generated a long list of creative and thoughtful ideas for promoting adoptions and raising money, and several with artistic ability helped me make posters featuring their dogs. I created flyers for each of the dogs to supplement the inmates' posters, and took these materials, along with one to three dogs at a time, to supportive business in the area in search of potential adopters. I organized nine of these adoption events and was able to find loving homes for some of the Prison Tails graduates and generate interest in and support for the program.

I performed a variety of other tasks during my eight-week internship, transporting dogs to veterinary appointments and to meet potential adopters. I also reviewed adoption applications, checking references and working to match approved applicants with appropriate dogs. I assisted with organizational tasks and worked with my supervisor to prepare various reports as we worked with Purdue North Central University to turn Prison Tails into a vocational education program.

Working with the inmates to train and find homes for the dogs was certainly a difficult and all-consuming task, but by far the most interesting and psychologically challenging aspect of my internship was the daily contact with inmate-handlers. I strove to treat every inmate I encountered with respect and sincere interest, and in return, the men taught me much more about the psychology of dogs, people, prison, and life than I can hope to convey here.

The inmate-handlers in our program were, at first glance, a rather intimidating bunch. Many had been convicted of drug-related offenses, but some were serving time for armed robbery, and even murder. Nearly all possessed several rather colorful tattoos, many acquired illegally within the prison walls and some proclaiming their bearers' allegiance to gangs such as the Aryan Brotherhood.

I quickly learned, however, that if I treated them with respect, they responded in kind. As I got to know them, the inmate-handlers seemed more like colleagues and less like hardened criminals. The prison experience tends – perhaps inevitably – to dehumanize inmates to the extent that a small gesture like a smile or handshake was often enough to earn an inmate's gratitude and respect. Prison officials frequently refer to the men as "offenders," even replacing their first names from prison documents with the generic and accusatory term (e.g. Offender Smith). The effect of the prison experience, I realized, is to take men who have committed crimes and brand them as criminals. Of course, these men are, in fact, criminals in the sense that they have been found guilty of various crimes, but by constantly demeaning and infantilizing the men, prison seems to effectively suggest to the men that they are Criminals and nothing more. It quickly became apparent to me that people who were labeled and treated as criminals had little hope of functioning productively in the community upon their release. Much of the work of the Prison Tails program, and much of my personal task for the internship, revolved around combating the low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness the prison experience seemed to foster in the inmates. At the same time, I learned to set boundaries that would enable me to be compassionate and sincere, but also professional, a skill that will hopefully serve me well as I embark on a career in clinical psychology.

As is probably already apparent, I came to empathize with the inmate-handlers during my internship. It is almost impossible *not* to feel compassion for their suffering through sweltering summer days with no air conditioning. Spending time with the inmates, getting to know their individual personalities, and seeing pictures of their children certainly gave me a new understanding of how interminably long a five year sentence – which sounds fairly short to most people on "the outside" – can feel to the person who serves it, one day at a time.

None of this is to say that these men should be released immediately, with no punishment. Some of them have undoubtedly committed disturbing, if not appalling, crimes. The racism, anger, and hatred that many of these men possessed, although often veiled around

the volunteers, was frightening to behold. Some of them were repeat offenders and seem bound to return to prison again upon their releases. A couple were honest enough to tell me as much.

Nevertheless, I thoroughly enjoyed working with the inmate-handlers and found almost all of them to be incredibly respectful and even thoughtful. Several demonstrated genuine concern for me and the other volunteers, and in particular, those with artistic talent dedicated countless hours to making beautiful and touching birthday cards and drawings to convey their gratitude and appreciation. Although not all of them are model citizens in the traditional sense, most of them proved to be caring and considerate, and I will forever be grateful to them for their kindness, candor, and insights, and to the Class of 1978 Foundation for making this incredible experience possible.