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- A detainee at the Youth Detention Center plays with Zorro (jumping) and Panda Friday. (Matt Hamilton/The Daily Citizen)



- Two detainees play with Panda and Zorro at the Youth Detention Center Friday. (Matt Hamilton/The Daily Citizen)



- One of the juveniles at the Youth Detention Center pets Zorro Friday. (Matt Hamilton/The Daily Citizen)



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July 22, 2013

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Humane society offers temp pets to troubled youth

By Christopher Smith

Editor's Note: At the request of Director Hughes, detainee names were withheld from the story due to privacy concerns.

Zorro, a dog, and "CM," a 17-year-old juvenile detainee at the Regional Youth Detention Center on Underwood Road, have a few things in common.

They both know what it's like to be behind bars; they both know what it's like to be unwanted, CM said.

Maybe that's why the two became fast friends after CM was asked to help foster Zorro, one of two dogs sponsored by the Humane Society of Northwest Georgia and housed at the detention center.

The humane society is using the program to highlight dogs who might otherwise be put down, rotating them out of the detention center monthly.

The reason some of the detainees get so attached is obvious for CM.

“It gives you good vibes and makes you feel good to take care of them and play with them,” he said. “It’s just, y’know, nice to know they don’t judge you. I get a lot of judgment (for what I did).”

What he did was spitting on a police officer after getting pulled over, CM said.

“I just got aggressive,” he said. “I made the wrong decision.”

So did 16-year-old detainee “JO” who, not wanting to go into detail about his arrest, said he was hanging out with “bad influences.”

JO says teaching Zorro and Panda, the second dog, how to play catch has helped him fight off feeling depressed behind bars.

“It’s not cool to be locked up and you go out with the dogs you forget all the negative things you have in your mind because you’re having so much fun,” he said. “They play fetch. They jump on you. And you forget about everything bad going on.”

Zorro’s energetic and outgoing personality makes everyone feel like his friend, the detainees said, while Panda, a female, has a laid back and easygoing personality perfect for kids.

Both deserve a home, the two detainees added.

“It feels great to be around them,” CM said. “We’re given a lot of trust to be with the dogs (though detention officers supervise the dogs at all times). It’s a good way to learn responsibility and get rid of your stress.”

That’s a big deal, Detention Officer Kristen Nix said.

“It brings a very therapeutic element to our facility,” she said. “It allows the kids here to interact with dogs, teach them things, to learn responsibility, to learn to share. The kids here, as soon as they learned about the dogs, were constantly asking about them. They were very excited for this.”

Director James R. “Bobby” Hughes agrees.

“There’s sometimes a misconception in our community that this center is a hard, horrific place,” he said. “It’s not. It’s strict, but you can be strict and show compassion and kindness. That’s how you change behavior.”

JO said working with the dogs makes him want to “start over.”

“They (the dogs) got a second chance at life,” he said. “If it wasn’t for Mr. Hughes these dogs would be dead. This gives them a second chance at life.”

That’s something CM wants, too.

“I haven’t figured it all out, I’m not sure when I get out, but when I get out I want to get my GED,” he said.

JO hopes he can finish high school when he leaves.

Both hope to be reunited with their own dogs back home, they said, adding that Zorro and Panda would make great household pets to anyone interested in adopting them.

To learn more about Zorro and Panda call the humane society at (706) 226-5002.

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