

## Pet Project: Youth and Stray Animals Learn from Each Other at Muscogee YDC

On a sweltering August day in middle Georgia that's more conducive to staying inside and sipping iced tea than any kind of outdoor activity, a group of young men at the Muscogee Youth Development Campus (YDC) are ready to brave the heat. In an out-of-the-way corner of the secure facility in Midland, seven dogs wait in their kennels for the young men who are their trainers and friends. Some of the dogs lie down and pant, others pace back and forth impatiently. Regardless of their disposition, all of the dogs snap to attention when they see the boys.

The young men, ranging from age 14 to 20, each go to a specific cage, open it, put their dog on a leash, and play with them for a while. The youth are part of a program jointly sponsored by Helping Hounds Across Georgia, Inc. and the Harris County Humane Society, which trains stray dogs to make them ready for adoption. Many of the dogs – mostly mixed breeds ranging in age from five months to three-years-old and weighing 35 to 70 pounds – would have a limited life expectancy without intervention.

Muscogee has been involved with this type of program since 2006 and has prepared more than 85 dogs for adoption. DJJ has a dog training program at one other

facility in Dalton. Only a few other states also offer dog training programs to juvenile offenders.

While the Muscogee dogs, which all come from Harris County, learn commands like sit, stay, and heel, the youth perform a service to the community as well as learn life skills such as discipline, compassion, patience, perseverance, commitment, respect and responsibility that help them in their development and rehabilitation but also throughout their lives.

In addition to attending the two weekly training sessions led by volunteer and long-time dog trainer Steve Shuman, the youth must get up at 6 a.m. to feed and water the dogs, and clean out their pens. They make two more trips each day, one in the afternoon and one in the evening.

"This is the only program I know where a young man can put his all out there for something alive," says DJJ Social Service Provider II Patrick Valentine, who oversees the program.

In order to participate in the program, youths must be on gold or platinum card status, meaning they must behave themselves and comply with their education and other program requirements. Sometimes, however, Valentine says, the program is used to give struggling youth an opportunity to find an activity that gives them meaning.

"We give them a chance to find something that gives them a little bit of fun and excitement about life," he says.

Today, the young men and Shuman teach the dogs to sit and heel. Shuman asks the boys take their dogs and line up against the fence. Some of the dogs sit, others try to wander, and still others try to lie down in the shade. Shuman encourages the youths to be patient and keep working with the animals.

"If a dog lies down 10 times, how many times am I going to pull him up?" Shuman asks.

"Ten!" the youth reply in unison.



**A Muscogee YDC youth teaches his dog to sit.**



**Steve Shuman shows one of the dog at Muscogee YDC a little affection.**

Shuman takes one of the dogs and shows the youths how to make a dog heel. Then he encourages them to try it with their dogs.

"Praise 'em when they're doing right," he tells his volunteer trainers, and they do, petting the dogs and slipping the dogs treats when they follow commands.



**A Muscogee YDC youth bonds with the dog he is training. (Photo Courtesy of Rick Ross)**

The youth in the program, for their part, are building self-esteem, and learning a little something about second chances. All of the youths agree they wanted to work with the dogs because they love animals, and the work gives them a sense of purpose.

"I like helping the dogs out," says one youth Bryan. "It makes me feel good about myself."

Jawaan, one of the youth in the program, wants to use what he is learning while working with Muscogee's dogs to help train his relatives' dogs when he is released. He said some of his family members have dogs they have talked about getting rid of because they can't control them.

"There isn't a reason to get rid of real good dog if you can teach them," he says.

Both Valentine and Shuman are confident that the youth are taking to heart the lessons they learn while working with the dogs. When he first started working with the youth, the youth didn't talk to him much, Shuman says. But, over time they started opening up, asking questions, and thinking about the future, he notes.

Shuman says the program teaches youth to develop a command presence that's not based on aggression, and allows the youth to learn that showing enthusiasm for something doesn't make them weak.