

Saving Pit Bulls from the Death Chamber

by Hank Pellissier, special to SF Gate Monday, March 3, 2003

Cindy Marabito is the director of Reunion Rescue, a nonprofit organization that saves pit bulls from execution, arranges obedience training and matches the misunderstood dogs with loving, responsible adopters. I interviewed the passionate savior in her Ingleside District backyard, which is layered with redwood chips, while two muscular pit bulls -- Junior and Rowdy Cowgirl -- frolicked around us, urging us to play.

You've got a strong twang in your voice -- where are you from?

I was raised near Beaumont, Texas. Its a great place to be from. I came out here in 1982 with the Dicks -- a punk Communist band. I was dating the lead guitarist. We all lived crammed in a tiny Bernal Heights studio, and half of us couldn't find work. It was hard times, the Reagan era.

Have you always loved pit bulls?

No. I used to hate 'em. I thought, "They're gonna kill our children!" because I believed everything I read and saw on the evening news. But one day, a female stray showed up at my door bleeding and limping because she'd been hit by a car. She was not like the hideous, vicious monsters I'd been told pit bulls were; she was sweet and friendly. I cared about her! The SFSPCA told me they didn't take animals of unknown origin, especially pit bulls, so I called San Francisco Animal Care & Control (ACC) and an officer picked her up. I was fearful that she would be put to sleep, but Angel was adopted by a wonderful man, and we are still dear friends to this day. She visits all the shopkeepers in her community daily, and she's known as the Princess of SOMA.

Now I love pit bulls as much as I used to hate 'em. They are the most sensitive, wear-all-their-feelings-on-their-faces, messed-up dogs you could ask for. When I see some guy in his fleece jacket walking his perfect Lab in the Marina, I can't help but think, "Amateur." Don't get me wrong -- Labs are great dogs -- but when you've been around these pit bulls, you get hooked like a junkie.

What led you to set up Reunion Rescue?

After I met Angel, I volunteered at ACC and I became very close to pit bulls; they're incredible dogs. But I had to watch them get executed over and over again because no one wandered in to adopt them. I couldn't stand watching good pit bulls being destroyed, so I finally just grabbed one -- an 8-month-old emaciated, pitiful excuse for a pit bull

with a note on his kennel warning that he was a leash chewer. I took Junior, who I still have, to obedience classes -- Bob Gutierrez and Youngblood Harris are the only trainers I use. If every city had a Bob or a Youngblood, this country wouldn't be euthanizing 42 million animals a year.

I started Reunion Rescue as a nonprofit, and it is going strong, even though we only had \$18 in the bank the other day. I am motivated by a memory I have of a pit bull walking down the ACC hall one day to Room 132, the Euthanasia Room. He's wagging his tail and looking up joyfully at the kennel attendant leading him because he thinks he is going out to play. I cannot live with that image without doing something. As long as Reunion Rescue has the adoption fee in the bank, that's one less guy that has to make that awful walk.

Are all the pit bulls you rescue from ACC?

Yes. ACC has a general rule that they'll shelter no more than four adoptable-to-the-public pit bulls at a time; if they get a fifth one, they'll execute the one that has been there the longest. But nowadays, I put a hold on every pit bull available there, so they always telephone me first.

I also often take medical cases from ACC, because those pit bulls are usually put to sleep even if they have treatable problems like mange, a skin disorder that isn't contagious and is easily treated with medicated dips.

How many pit bulls has Reunion Rescue saved? And do other San Francisco organizations also rescue dogs?

Reunion Rescue has saved more than 50 dogs in the last year. Besides us, there's also Indigo Dog Rescue, One at a Time Rescue, A Grateful Dog Rescue and Rocket Dog Rescue. We are all alerted by ACC before the dogs are euthanized; they call us to see if we can take them.

What kind of people adopt pit bulls from you?

The Bay Area is largely made up of people who left some small town or painful experience to move to a more tolerant way of life, to reinvent themselves or find others who share their feelings. It has been my experience with pit bulls that they touch something inside us -- that is what love is. Pit bulls have been misused and robbed of their dignity; their drive has been misdirected. It is my opinion that San Francisco's not-so-perfect adopters and not-so-lucky dogs have found each other and are rebuilding the reputation that pit bulls deserve.

Tell me about the history of pit bulls in America.

Pit bulls were the No. 1 pet of choice in America. Helen Keller's dog was a pit bull. Humphrey Bogart and John Steinbeck had pit bulls. So did Fred Astaire, Fatty Arbuckle,

Theodore Roosevelt and Thomas Edison. Petey, the Little Rascals' dog, was a pit bull. The most decorated soldier in World War I was Stubby -- a pit bull.

Pit bulls were known as fight dogs, but they were also bred to be human friendly. The goal was to be able to reach into the pit and grab the dog without getting bitten. It is a strange history, but pit bulls are emotional and intense dogs and extremely loving. They bond to their human friends and make crummy watch dogs, because they're so people friendly.

What defines the pit-bull personality?

Diane Jessup, author of "The Working Pit Bull," defines them as "game," which means "willing to try with an effort that is beyond the norm." Not every pit bull is tenacious and unwilling to give up, but many are. Pit bulls need a job to do. They're excellent at search and rescue, and bomb and drug work and other tasks. At Reunion Rescue, we direct our dogs toward what their particular job might be. Some dogs only like to chew rawhide, but that's a job -- the dog gets a full upper-body workout just going through a bone or chew toy. Junior there is a chewer -- my mangled eyeglasses are on display at Site for Sore Eyes as a warning to buy the replacement insurance.

For many other pit bulls, their job in life is Frisbee. Watch this. (She throws a Frisbee, and one dog leaps excitedly to snatch it). Rowdy Cowgirl here is the captain of our Reunion Rescue Pit Bull Frisbee Team, which consists of our saved dogs and their adopters and is under the strict guidance of our trainer. We performed at Pet Pride last October. The audience was scared at first because they thought the dogs were going to go feast on them, but the pit bulls wowed them! Pitties are big hams; they have an incredible urge to please people. The show was pandemonium -- we opened with Guns 'n' Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle" and closed with Charlie Daniels' "Devil Went Down to Georgia." Pit bulls flew out into the crowd and came back with the Frisbee every time. People are still talking about that show.

What do you feed your pit bulls?

I feed all my dogs Wellness brands because they are made of quality ingredients. If I see the word "byproduct," I run the other way. Many popular dog foods are made of horrible things like cancerous organs, filthy water, decayed foods and euthanized animals. People wonder why their dog is snapping at dogs in the park, and I tell them, "Hey, they're smelling their next meal."

I insist that all Reunion Rescue adopters continue to feed them Wellness products. We also insist on training throughout the dog's life, or we'll come and take the dog back. Our dogs are also spayed or neutered -- approximately 95 percent of all dog maulings are done by dogs that are not neutered or spayed.

Reunion Rescue is a nonprofit organization. How much money have you raised?

We totally survive on donations; we raised \$20,000 last year. Money comes from people who send donations in, or they give money to us at our Mobile Adoption Table. Petco, in the Potrero Center, also made us their official donee for three of their events last year, and other pet stores and pet-food companies, like Critter Fritters, Petcetera and HealthWise, also give to us on a regular basis. Wellness is a new friend, too, since they heard how much we live by their food.

(Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!)

Okay, that's the doorbell. Someone's coming to adopt a dog. I gotta go; I gotta end this interview. I'm sorry, but even if you were Ed McMahon with a check for \$150 million, I'd have to go, because when someone wants to adopt a pit bull, there's nothing more important.

For more information about Reunion Rescue, contact Cindy Marabito at doggirl1@earthlink.net.