

Local dogs chosen for Customs Service careers

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TAUNTON -- They started in a shelter, but now they are on their way to service as government agents.

Two Staffordshire terriers from the Taunton Animal Shelter were adopted by the U.S. Customs Service last week and will go through a canine training program.

The aptly named Lisa L. Kennell, canine dog procurement officer for Customs, chose the two dogs Thursday for their attention, retrieving instinct, size, disposition and interest in retrieving.

"I lucked out. They are both nice, strong dogs," Kennell said, adding that she can go to 50 shelters without finding a suitable dog.

Kennell travels all over the country looking for dogs for the Customs Service to use to detect contraband. Dogs trained by Customs are highly sought after by other agencies around the world, Kennell said.

That critical selection process leads to excellence, she said.

The dogs ascending to such an elite corps have humble roots. Lauren, a red brindle pit bull, was given to the shelter by its owner, and Jasmine, who is black with a white chest, was a stray.

Kennell said the dogs will be trained by Customs officials and either used by the agency itself to spot currency or narcotics or they will be donated to another agency.

"To them it's not work. For eight to 10 hours they are playing," she said, adding that the eager dogs often cheer the agents up.

Lauren and Jasmine could end up in one of several international locations that uses Customs-trained dogs, including Aruba, Puerto Rico and Israel.

Taunton Shelter volunteer Sandy Ruscetta said that pit bulls are very intelligent but unjustly get a bad name.

"A lot of people will buy the dogs and have no clue as to what they are getting into. They don't know how to raise them," she said.

Animal Control Officer Manuel Massa said Lauren and Jasmine had nice dispositions.

"Those dogs were sweet. It's a shame pit bulls get a bad name. They were never bad dogs at all," he said.

Ruscetta said some people wrongly allow dogs to assume the "alpha" role, adding that you should never play tug-of-war with a dog.

Massa said that about 80 percent of dogs that come in are quickly adopted, but the shelter also has had a couple of dogs since July 2000 and a few since 1999. Massa said they will eventually be adopted.

Lauren and Jasmine are not the only dogs to graduate from the shelter and go on to a public service career. A German Shepherd was recently adopted by Janice Ritter of Northeastern German Shepherd Rescue to be used for search and rescue.

Kennell said 70 percent of their dogs come from shelters, and another 30 percent are private donations. The agency adopts about 250 dogs per year, and uses a variety of breeds including Labrador retrievers, huskies and mixed breeds. The dogs should weigh from 40 to 90 pounds. Their most important attribute, she said, is "a strong desire to retrieve. That's their motivation."

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