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From fight dog to famous pet, Cookie defies pit bull label

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By Linda Wilson Fuoco, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Pam Panchak/Post-Gazette

Cookie gets a pet from Marilou Grace, of Richland, during Cookie's party at the Animal Friends shelter yesterday. Animal Friends honored Cookie, a pit bull who was rescued from a life in dog-fighting circles and went on to become the official "spokesdog" for the Allegheny Abuse Animal Relief Fund as part of its "Bully Breed Month" celebrations.

Cookie is a dog that has spent most of his life in the limelight.

In his early years, the pit bull was a champion fighting dog whose exploits were publicized in a national dog fighting magazine. For the last seven years he's been a pampered pet and a poster dog who has made dozens of public appearances that have raised thousands of dollars for abandoned, abused and neglected animals.

Cookie was the guest of honor yesterday at a party at the Animal Friends shelter in Ohio Township. About 50 people and a dozen pit bulls attended to celebrate Cookie's accomplishments and to raise public awareness that pit bulls -- and other "bully" breeds including American Staffordshire terriers and Staffordshire bull terriers -- can be loyal and loving pets.

"Cookie is probably the most famous dog in Allegheny County," said Kathy Hecker, one of the shelter's humane agents.

Ms. Hecker is probably not exaggerating, for Cookie's picture is sent out each year to the more than 100,000 dog owners who buy state dog licenses, by mail, from Allegheny County Treasurer John Weinstein.

Cookie's picture is always on the front of the pamphlet that asks dog owners to contribute to the Allegheny Abused Animal Relief Fund started in 2001 by Mr. Weinstein and county District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr. More than \$500,000 has been raised for the fund that most dog lovers know as AAARF! The funds, earmarked to help abused animals, are administered through a board that includes representatives of Animal Friends, Western Pennsylvania Humane Society and the Animal Rescue League of Western Pennsylvania.

When Ms. Hecker rescued Cookie seven years ago, the dog then known as "Crook" was chained outside and all of the ribs on his cinnamon-colored, battle-scarred body were clearly visible. Pictures of him weighing less than 30 pounds were featured in the early editions of AAARF! pamphlets. Animal Friends paid fairly hefty veterinarian bills to nurse him back to health and to get his weight up to 64 pounds.

"Cookie was a good and sweet dog from the first day we got him," Ms. Hecker said. "He

never exhibited any aggression toward people or other dogs."

But who would want to adopt a pit bull that had fought successfully in professional circles?

Karen Cirrincione agreed to take Cookie into her McCandless home, and then she agreed to accompany him to dozens of public appearances per year to promote AAARF!

Cookie, who is thought to be about 14-years-old, has slowed down a bit with age. Though there was some talk of having a retirement party for Cookie, Ms. Cirrincione says he still enjoys getting out to meet and greet the public, so appearances will continue, though perhaps with less frequency.

Cookie's party at Animal Friends was one of many "love-a-bull" events planned at the Animal Friends shelter in September and October. Events include a Bully Adoption Day on Oct. 13 and an informational seminar on Wednesday at 7:30 p.m.

Pit bulls often make up one-third to one-half of the dogs in shelters across the country. Because of that, Animal Friends has a Project Pit Bull that provides free spay or neuter surgery for all pit bulls.

For more information, call Animal Friends at 412-847-7002 or go to its Web site at www.animal-friends.org.

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