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Pit bulls sniff out crime for Washington State Patrol

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OLYMPIA, Wash. -- Pit bulls as crime fighters?

That's the goal of a Diane Jessup, who rescues pit bulls from animal shelters and dogfighting operations around the nation and brings them to LawDogsUSA.

She trains them and then donates the dogs to law enforcement agencies to sniff out drugs and bombs, a task more commonly performed by German shepherds, Doberman pinschers, and Belgian Malinois.

"My pit bulls right now are Jackie Robinson," she said, referring to the first black player in Major League Baseball. "They're breaking a barrier down."

Trooper Steve Gardner, a K-9 trainer with the Washington State Patrol, said eight pit bulls donated by Jessup are being used by the patrol to find narcotics and bombs. He said two more puppies from Jessup are about to enter the K-9 training academy.

Jessup said another pit bull is working with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security protecting Washington state's ferries.

She said pit bulls have gotten a bad reputation because they are sometimes associated with people on the wrong side of the law.

"A lot of anti-social people own them," she told The Olympian. "It would be nice if people saw the reality that most pit bulls are good."

Jessup, 48, worked as an animal control officer in Olympia for about 20 years, and has been breeding and raising pit bulls for about 35 years. She currently has about 10 pit bulls, plus some puppies, on her property.

She said it's important for pit bulls destined for law enforcement to enjoy playing with a toy, as toys are used as a reward during training.

Jessup started LawDogsUSA in 2004 after sneaking a pit bull, Neville, out of Ontario, Canada, after a law banning pit bulls was passed. Jessup said Neville faced either a death sentence or life in a research facility.

Now, Neville is helping to protect Washington ferries.

Jessup said she is looking into getting custody of some of the dogs seized from Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick, who pleaded guilty last week to a federal dogfighting conspiracy charge in Richmond, Va.

"They're finally seeing pit bulls as victims" instead of villains, Jessup said.

Information from: The Olympian, <http://www.theolympian.com>