

TheRegisterHerald.com

09/01/2005

A dog's best friend

By: Bob Audette , Staff Reporter

STANFORD

It is said that a dog is man's best friend.

For some dogs though, their best friend is a woman.

In the case of the American pit bull terrier, that person is Jane Berkey.

Berkey and the Animal Farm Foundation Inc., on a small farm in central Dutchess County, rescue the dogs from sure death and adopt them out to families ready for the responsibility.

"We rescue and place the best dogs that, with responsible owners, will help restore the image of the pit bull," said Berkey.

"Pit bulls are people-loving, loyal, affectionate, smart dogs who give their all to please you," said Berkey.

"Petey, of The Little Rascals, is an excellent example of the good-natured character of the pit bull dog," added Berkey.

But Berkey said that there are just too many dogs to save.

"On any given day, as many as 70% of the dogs in inner-city animal control agencies are pit bulls. Only 1 in 600 pit bulls will find home," she said sadly. "There are simply not enough responsible homes."

Berkey said that two years ago, 6,500 "pit bull-type" dogs entered the New York City animal control system. Only 191 made it out of the system alive, she said.

"It's a big dirty secret, but we are killing animals because people don't stop and think about the lifetime responsibility of taking care of an animal," said Berkey.

But some people feel little sympathy for the pit bull's fate, citing its viciousness and its deadliness.

However, according to Karen Delise, an independent researcher and the author of "Fatal Dog Attacks," the three causal factors for fatal dog attacks are function of the dog, reproductive status and owner responsibility, not the breed of the animal.

According to Delise's research, "There is no documented case where a single, neutered household pit bull was the cause of a human fatality."

"The reality is we are at the other end of the leash," said Berkey. "We are responsible for the care, control and custody of our dogs." American Temperament Test Society results prove that with a responsible owner, pit bulls make great companions.

The test rates dogs on characteristics such as "... stability, shyness, aggressiveness, and friendliness as well as the dog's instinctive protectiveness towards its handler and/or self-preservation in the face of a threat," according to the American Temperament Test Society Web site, www.atts.org.

Berkey said that more than 80% of the pit bull-type dogs tested by the ATTS passed the test.

She said pit bull dogs routinely achieve a higher passing rate than most other breeds, including the golden retriever and the German shorthaired pointer, which won Best in Show at this year's Westminster Dog Show.

"No dog is inherently vicious," said Berkey. She said it's a combination of both nature and nurture that determine what a dog's temperament will be.

"Pit bulls are at the heart of so many of these battles because they are the fad breed of the moment," she said.

Berkey said when pit bulls became a "fad breed," they were popularized by people like drug dealers who wanted a dog for protection. "They took the dogs' virtues of loyalty, determination and trainability and used them against the dogs," she said.

Child-friendly?

"The root of most of these problems is an irresponsible owner," she said.

"The majority of these dogs live quietly in America as family companions," said Berkey.

Berkey added that prior to 1980, the pit bull was the most recommended child-friendly dog.

Berkey said a symbol of American courage and character, the American pit bull terrier represented our country in WW I. She also said that pit bulls have been mascots for sports teams and fire houses and have worked with police constables and on railroads.

"A U.S. postal stamp commemorated Helen Keller and her pit bull companion," said Berkey.

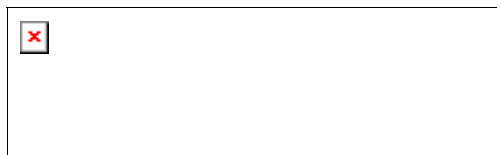
"What changed?" she asked. "Not the dogs - the masters."

John Conklin of Tivoli, who has a 10-year old son and a 6-year old daughter, said after researching the breed, he adopted a pit bull for the family.

"You can't just go by the numbers," he said. "These are really great dogs."

"He's fun to play with," said Adam Conklin. "I'm not scared around the dog. I feel safe."

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"But no child should be left unsupervised with any dog," said Berkey. "Kids can't read dogs and dogs can't read kids."

John Conklin agreed but added his dog "plays gentler with the kids than I do." "They're sweet, loyal and smart," said Marylou Sotanski, who has had a pit bull since 1988.

"We are on our fourth pit bull now," she said, adding that all the dogs have loved her kids.

Lisa Harford, the caretaker for Rocky, who she trained from five-and-a-half-weeks to be a rescue dog, said he works with police organizations and search and rescue teams and also is certified to visit nursing homes.

"Some people are nervous at first, but after they get to know them, they fall in love," said Harford.

"You can make any animal vicious or docile," said Jacob Ruckh, of Catskill.

"Just like a child," added his wife, Carol.

"The pit bull is not a breed, but three breeds, and a legion of look-a-likes," explained Berkey. Berkey said these three breeds are American pit bull terrier, the American Staffordshire terrier and the Staffordshire bull terrier.

Berkey said the AFF supports increased penalties for any form of animal cruelty.

She added that breeding an animal for fighting or to be vicious is a form of cruelty.

She said AFF would like to see breeding for aggression criminalized.

"We also support strict enforcement of the local leash and licensing laws and support a mandate to spay and neuter any dog fou ranging before it is returned to the owner," said Berkey.

The Humane Society of the United States reports that 70% of dog bites are from un-spayed or un-neutered animals.

A rigorous process

Berkey said adopters of pit bulls from AFF should be prepared to undergo a rigorous process including making several trips to make sure the fit between family and animal is just right.

"Every family member including their dog must come to meet the dog they are considering for adoption," said Berkey.

She added that AFF also performs follow-up checks after the dog is placed in a home.

"Families must be prepared to meet all the dog's needs including exercise and human companionship," said Berkey.

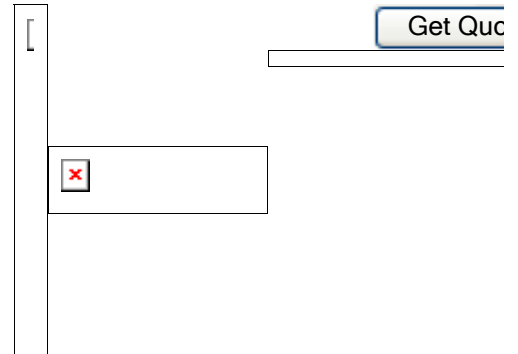
All AFF dogs are spayed/neutered and micro-chipped and have earned or are working toward their "canine good citizenship cert

Berkey added that AFF will take back any of its animals for any reason.

Berkey said AFF has a small professional staff supplemented by volunteers and is privately funded, though she added AFF glaci donations.

Berkey recommended that any one looking for further information should go to animalfarmfoundation.org.

All visits to AFF are by appointment only.







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