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## Defamed dogs?

BY PETE HUMES

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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LINDY

KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH"  
height="164" width="250"  
border="1" alt="Malone, a pit bull,  
and his two " />

Malone, a pit bull, and his two "siblings" report for a hard day's work every day with their owner, Dixon Kerr.  
LINDY KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH

Monty, a hefty, hairy golden retriever, and Jamie, a smaller brown mutt, Malone arrives at 8 a.m. and heads down the carpeted stairs to claim a spot on the black-and-white checked floor.

While Kerr, a contractor, is out fixing old houses, the four-legged trio welcomes visitors and keeps employees company.

Splayed lazily on a soft square pillow, Malone hardly looked like a bloodthirsty killer. But a recent string of tragedies has again cast pit bulls in an unfortunate light. And even though Malone hasn't been involved in any incidents, Kerr (and every other pit bull owner) is feeling the heat of the panic and fear that follow the breed.

"The media loves a monster," said Marcy Setter, the director of marketing and public relations for Pit Bull Rescue Central, a nonprofit, online virtual shelter and resource center.

"We need as a society to start learning instead of pointing fingers," said Setter. "There are always bad dogs, just like there are bad people."

According to Setter, more than 20 breeds are commonly mistaken for pit bulls. And "pit bull" is not even a breed of dog but a general term used to lump together the American pit bull terrier, the American Staffordshire terrier and the Staffordshire bull terrier.

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Any boss would be proud.

Malone commutes every day from his Union Hill neighborhood to his Shockoe Slip office. He shows up on time, works 40 hours a week and never asks for a paycheck. He's great with clients. His co-workers love him.

And, most important, he never never ever -- pees on the floor.

Malone is a pit bull, one of Dixon Kerr's three dogs that spend the day in the basement offices of ACORN (The Alliance to Conserve Old Richmond Neighborhoods) on East Cary Street. Along with

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What comes to mind when you think of the pit bull breed of dog?

Mean and dangerous

"But the words 'pit bull' sell papers," said Setter. "Unfortunately, people don't see the good side. They don't see the therapy and the service dogs. If my pit bull could walk on water, the press would print, 'Pit bull can't swim.'"

Joyce Willis fell hard for Ghost. According to her daughter, Heather Deem, Willis "just had to stop and see" the white pit bull that was up for adoption on a sidewalk in Carytown seven years ago. The soft-spoken, 68-year-old therapist who lives in South Boston is the polar opposite of the stereotypical pit bull owner. But she is part of a passionate group working to restore the image of the beleaguered breeds by example.

Inspired by the successful placement of Ghost (who shares a home with a Lhasa apso and a small white cat), Deem sought to adopt a pit bull of her own. The 35-year-old staffing consultant adopted Rudy five years ago and two years later found Tess wandering the streets of her Church Hill neighborhood.

"Pit bulls are so loyal and willing to please," Deem said, "more than any other breed."

Since becoming the proud owner of two pit bulls, Deem keeps a vigilant eye out for animals in need near her home in Chimborazo Park.

"I just try to help the ones that cross my path," Deem said.

Deem dismisses the belief that every stray pit bull is a ticking time bomb beyond rehabilitation. She said each dog is different, and how well they do is ultimately determined by the responsibility and capability of the owner.

"The people that would make great homes don't come here," said Jody Jones, the city's program manager for animal care and control. "They go to a breeder or pet store."

It's hard to blame them. Aside from the constant supply of pit bull horror stories, the Richmond Animal Shelter on Chamberlayne Avenue isn't exactly luxurious. The grass needs cutting, and the surrounding neighborhood is an urban limbo of auto-parts stores, small industrial businesses and abandoned buildings.

Jones said about 60 percent of stray dogs that come into the shelter are pit bulls or pit bull mixes.

"People are concerned by what they hear about the breed," said Jones. "So we focus on placing the good ones, ambassadors for the breed . . . what pit bulls were before the community began using and abusing them."

Jones agreed that the majority of pit bull problems can be traced back to the owners. And it's not only the people who encourage aggression or force pit bulls to fight that should raise concern. Simply keeping the dog from socializing with humans and other dogs is abuse enough.

"Tethering dogs with chains in a backyard builds frustration and anxiety," said Jones.

When abused and unsocialized animals breed, the problem is compounded. According to Jones, a dog's sociability (or lack of it) gets passed on to each generation.

- Bad reputation
- Misunderstood
- Good dog
- Other

What do you think of the current run of bad stories about pit bulls?

- Happens every few years, its hype
- Pit bulls are dangerous and deserve a bad reputation
- Its not the animals, but the people that a responsible for them
- Undecided

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"Richmond is quite behind the times as far as spaying and neutering," said Jones. "That's a part of the challenge we face -- the breeding causes the burden."

Back at ACORN, Malone sat unfazed by the flash.

The photographer squatted inches from the dog and clicked away while Kerr stood, arms crossed and smiling like a doting father. A longtime dog lover, Kerr once shared the overwhelming apprehension that many people feel toward pit bulls.

"I used to say that a pit bull was the only dog I didn't like," Kerr recalled. "I said that out of ignorance."

After Animal Control found Malone wandering in Highland Park, the emaciated animal caught the eye of Jennie Dotts (for 10 years Dotts found homes for strays through Save Our Shelter, a rescue organization she co-founded).

Dotts persuaded her co-worker to look past the pit bull myths (killer instinct, locking jaws) and give the dog a try. Kerr conceded that he was still very unsure after that first night with Malone, but soon the abused dog's personality took a sharp turn for the better. In a matter of weeks, Malone's disposition brightened.

"He was hopping and skipping down the street," Kerr said.

Throughout his photo shoot, Malone ignored the other dogs. Hungry for attention, they licked high-heeled feet and poked wet noses into laps.

Maybe he lifted a brow or huffed through droopy pink and black gums, but Malone kept calm. The 88 pounds of muscle gave no indication of being a taut, loaded weapon ready to pounce.

In fact, the only time Malone stirred at all was to leap to his owner's side. As the man walked through the office, the dog clung to Kerr's worn khaki pants as if attached by Velcro.

As the pit bull lumbered back to his bed with a mouthful of dirty stuffed animal, Dotts remarked that Malone was the most catlike dog she has ever encountered.

"In fact, do you want to know a secret?" Dotts asked. "His nickname is 'Kitten.'"

Exasperated, Kerr shook his head, "Oh, no. Don't print that."

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