

K9 student Jayden with his dog Freddy.



K9YA students and shelter dogs start agility training together.



K9 YOUTH ALLIANCE

Kids Helping Dogs Helping Kids

By Larry Kay | Photos by Abril Calderon



Graduation Day! Diplomas for the student and the shelter dog.



K9 student Jocelyn with her dog Lancelot.

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“Before the K-9 program I was really scared of dogs,” said Jaymie in her speech to the graduation day audience of 100 people in the Pasadena, California, Boys and Girls Club gymnasium.

Jaymie, 15, had just graduated from the K9 Youth Alliance (K9YA) after-school enrichment program where, each weekday for three weeks she learned to train a shelter dog in basic behaviors, leash walking, the agility course, and dog tricks. Jaymie’s fear of dogs faded in the program’s first week, especially during training exercises where she got to handle seven different shelter dogs. “I got to learn the difference between all dogs,” she said.

Breakthroughs like Jaymie’s happen for most K9YA students. Jasmine, 16, said in her graduation speech, “I’ve learned to be more patient and calm,” which many K9YA students say is an important life lesson the program teaches them along with dog handling skills. Each student writes a farewell letter to the shelter dog they learned to handle. Here is Jasmine’s letter to “her” 4-year-old pit bull mix named Renatta:

Dear Renatta,

It was fun learning new tricks with you. I’m going to miss you so much of course but I really hope you get adopted because you are amazing and such a fast learner. Good luck in your future life because I know you’ll get adopted for sure. I’ll never forget how we learned to sit, watch me, lay down, roll over, give high five, play dead and a little bit of sit pretty. Anyway, good luck. I love you and I’ll miss you.

From (your trainer/best friend), Jasmine R

K9YA’s motto is “kids helping dogs helping kids.” Each immersive program gets shelter dogs adopted while giving students breakthrough life experiences. K9YA Executive Director and co-founder Kelly Osburn said, “In addition to learning the principles of rewards-based, force-free dog training, the youth in our programs develop leadership skills like clear communication, empathy, responsibility, public speaking and self-reflection.”

K9YA programs (www.K9YouthAlliance.org) focus on serving teens and tweens in under-resourced communities. Osburn, a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) who also holds a master’s degree in research psychology, said, “Many students haven’t had the chance to have a pet. In our programs kids get to experience the benefits of the human-animal connection and the joy of working with a dog. They share their new knowledge and experiences with their friends and family.”

K9YA’s promise to dogs is equally compelling. “Our promise to shelter dogs is that you are not forgotten,” Osburn stressed. “We will accept you where you are and allow you to experience learning in a friendly, rewarding environment. We will offer you a greater range of expression and choice, while providing daily enrichment, training and advocacy to help you find your forever family.”

She added, “We respect the difficult task shelters have, and are happy to help where we can. For pet parents, we are honored to play a part in preparing your new family member for his or her new home and will assist in any way we can to help your dog transition out of the shelter and into your home.”

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

K9YA shelter dogs are provided by Los Angeles Animal Services (LAAS), the city-operated shelters. In a recent KABC-TV news report on K9YA, LAAS reported that K9YA’s program “will help calm them [the dogs] down and so these kinds of programs really help the dogs,” said Agnes Sibal, LAAS Public Information Director, adding that when families adopt K9YA program dogs “they have animals who already know some basic tricks, maybe some basic house rules.”

Osburn and her staff work closely with leaders in after-school programs, especially with Boys & Girls Clubs of America (B&GC). “Boys & Girls Clubs of Pasadena have a long-standing partnership with K9 Youth Alliance to provide the kids in our clubhouses the opportunity to learn to train and socialize dogs from a shelter, getting them prepped for adoption,” said B&GC Pasadena CEO Lisa Cavelier. She sees many results that come from the B&GC-K9YA synergy, including “confidence, patience, knowledge of how to care for an animal, and they definitely also fall in love with the dogs.” Cavelier said that K9YA is also a big help to “kids who are stressed, and we see it first-hand. It’s such a sweet, caring environment for everyone, and our kids just thrive. We love K9’s tagline of ‘kids helping dogs helping kids.’ It really says it all. It’s been a great partnership for many years, and we look forward to many more.”

Osburn co-founded K9 Youth Alliance as a nonprofit organization in 2013 and invested three years in developing the signature program while attracting key volunteers, including legendary dog trainer Paul Owens (a.k.a., “The Original Dog Whisperer”), who served as the program’s original dog trainer and humane educator. Owens, who continues to serve as an advisor, said, “K9YA’s program builds confidence and trust for each dog and child.”

SAFETY IS ALWAYS FIRST

Each K9YA session includes going over safety rules that are designed to keep kids and dogs from harm and from triggering negative reactions. “If you set up the environment where everybody’s safe, then it’s natural to trigger everybody’s curiosity,” Owens said. “Curiosity combined with fun fuels motivation. That’s when hearts

and minds open up and both dogs and children want to learn rather than being forced to learn.” He added, “Both dogs and children become empowered by teaching them what they can do and what choices they can make to get what they really want without having to be violent. They learn that how they treat animals is how they should treat themselves and others, that is: Be Kind, Be Safe, Be Respectful.”

Safety also has psychological impacts on students, both positive and negative. K9YA Educational Facilitator Jai Oni Sly-Dane, Ed.D, said, “Safe experiences with dogs can promote a student’s healthy relationship attachments with people as well as with dogs. Unsafe experiences with dogs can trigger a student’s existing psychological wounds.” Dr. Sly-Dane’s doctoral dissertation is titled “Best practices for nonprofit organizations using human-animal interaction as an intervention with at-risk youth.” She also serves on K9YA’s board of directors.

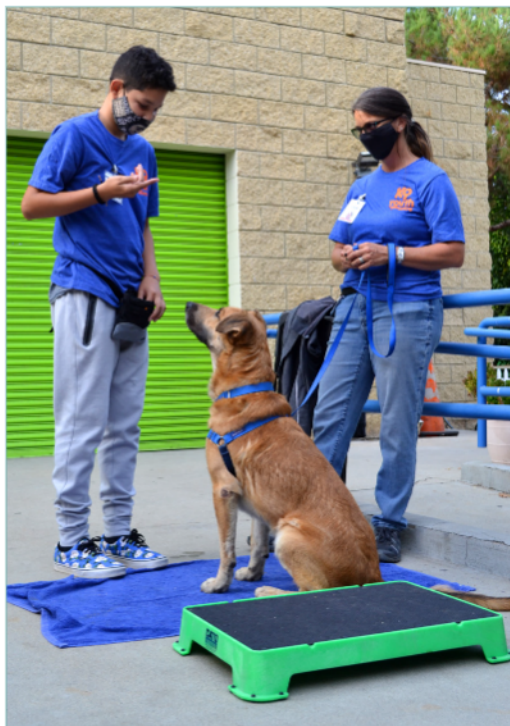
K9YA’S AFTER-SCHOOL ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

Each after-school program is staffed by a team of six professionals: program director, educational facilitator, dog training instructor, two Fear Free® Certified shelter dog wranglers, and the executive director. The staff is assisted by approximately 12 trained volunteers, most of whom are Fear Free® Certified. K9YA Program Director Sara Du Bouchet, CPDT, leads the curriculum and manages the staff and volunteers. Du Bouchet said, “We treat our students as adult human beings who have autonomy to make decisions, which is usually different from how they are treated in school and often in their home lives. That’s a big reason why kids appreciate this program, in addition to having fun while they learn about dogs.”

The program’s first week focuses on acclimation: pairing up each student with a shelter dog, getting the pair comfortable, and beginning to train using positive reinforcement fundamentals. Exercises promote socialization, including “Doggie Speed Dating,” where the students meet each dog for a few minutes and then write down their top choices for dogs with whom they would like to be paired.

Once pairings are made, the students continue to have brief training sessions with all the other dogs during socialization exercises. “Circle and Train” gives the students a brief session to interact with and train each dog. Since safety rules dictate that the dogs aren’t allowed to interact with other dogs, the exercise “Circle and Sniff” allows each dog to sniff and eat treats on each of the other dogs’ training mats.

Each dog’s large, padded training mat includes a platform place board. Platform training is an essential component to training foundational behaviors: sit, stay, watch me, down, place. The students are also introduced to leash walking techniques. Empowering the students’ progress is valued as highly as the dogs’ training progress. “We try to ask the kids questions rather than give them answers,” said Du Bouchet. “It’s a path of discovery and self-discovery. If we adults are constantly jumping in and fixing everything, then we’ve robbed those kids from achievements that will help them grow. It takes a lot of patience.”



A K9YA student and shelter dog practice sit while a volunteer observes.

She elaborated, “We give volunteers tools to help guide the kids, such as asking, ‘What do you think will help your dog get on the platform?’ If a dog doesn’t seem interested in training, then ask a question like, ‘Do you think your dog is having a kind of a bad day? Do you think maybe we want to take them on a little walk or give them a break? What do you think?’ Asking questions empowers the kids to come to their own decision to advocate for their dogs. We also want the kids to advocate for themselves, because we don’t know what their day at school was like or what they went through at home that morning. We observe the kids’ general behavior, and if they are distracted or having an off day, we give them that space and say, ‘If you want to take a break, that’s totally fine. If you need to step out or if you just want to hang out, toss your dog some treats, and take a little break, you’re allowed to do that.’ Learning to advocate for themselves is an important life skill.”

AGILITY TRAINING AND GRADUATION

The program’s second week deepens fundamental training and socialization and adds learning a dog trick or two that the dog enjoys. Week Two also introduces the agility course: tunnel, weave cones, low bar jumps, low teeter totter, pause table, climb up to a high pause table. “From the outside, the agility course looks like it’s just for fun. But agility also spills over into useful practical behaviors that gets these dogs adopted and stay adopted,” explained K9YA Dog Training Instructor Krista Goodsitt, CPDT, CBCC-KA. She noted, for example, “a tunnel builds a dog’s confidence to go in a crate. Agility also builds their relationship quicker. Agility builds confidence, hones motor skills, and is lots of fun for the kids as well as the dogs. The beauty is in the process. We grownups get to watch the magic happen.”

The program’s third and final week focuses on preparing for graduation, culminating in a graduation event that the community attends to celebrate and potentially meet a dog for adoption. “The kids are nervous. They want to make sure that they show their dog

off to look great and perform all these behaviors, tricks, and agility in front of an audience. They're also nervous about speaking in public, which is new for most of them," Du Bouchet said.

Week Three also prepares students for the end of the program. It's natural for the students to feel sadness when they say farewell to their dogs. Throughout the program, the staff and volunteers remind the students to say goodbye to their dogs at the end of each day in case their dog gets adopted before the next session, and especially on Fridays since most adoptions happen over the weekends.

When a dog is adopted before the end of the program, it's a celebration of mixed emotions: happy that the dog got adopted, sad to now miss the dog, happy to welcome a new dog into the program. "Learning to say goodbye is a valuable life skill that helps the student develop resilience and healthy relationship attachments," said Dr. Sly-Dane. The program allows a student the time to experience the emotions and adjust while the other students experience being supportive. Dr. Sly-Dane said, "By front-loading the real possibility that a student's dog will be adopted at any time, we allow the students to learn that 'I can build a relationship with a person or a dog. The relationship may be short, but then I get to do it again with another dog and continue to build relationships and grow.'"

HUMANE EDUCATION IS KEY

The program also includes daily humane education exercises and projects. One project is the kennel poster created by the student for his/her dog that is affixed to the dog's kennel at the shelter and declares that the dog is a K9YA participant. The kennel poster displays photos, words, and design elements that communicate the dog's abilities and personality. The kennel poster also includes a QR code that links to a YouTube video of that dog performing behaviors, tricks, and agility. The students' kennel posters with QR codes are instrumental in getting the dogs adopted.

Humane education also includes a visit to the shelter where students see "their" dogs and kennel posters. Students learn how the shelter works, which helps them value the contribution they're making by getting a dog ready to be adopted. Another humane education highlight is "The Experts Panel." The students sit together behind a microphone and take questions about dog training, behavior, and humane education from staff and volunteers. This activity serves as a class exam and gives students some public speaking experience before graduation day.

CHOOSING K9YA PROGRAM DOGS

Selecting the dogs for each program is a rigorous week of behavior assessment. Led by Goodsitt and Du Bouchet, and assisted by staff wranglers, shelter personnel, and K9YA volunteers, 25 to 30 dogs are assessed, from which seven are chosen for each program. Goodsitt said, "We test the dogs for whether they want to orient to or pay attention to a handler. We do all sorts of touch tests. We test for reaction to sudden movements and sounds, other dogs, resource guarding. We also discover previous training, behavior cues, and play patterns that a dog already has. These dogs will come into our classroom area from an environment of chaos, so we want to make sure that we have a very high level of certainty of safety."



K9YA students and shelter dogs use positive reinforcement and place boards for basic behaviors and dog tricks.

Dogs selected for the program tend to be dogs who have been overlooked while being at the shelter a long time. They may even have a behavior mark on their record. "We rely on the wonderful shelter staff and volunteers to recommend dogs and let us know their experiences, especially since the overcrowded population at city shelters is high," Goodsitt said, adding that K9YA, by taking some of the load off the shelter staff, "helps diminish compassion fatigue."

PROGRAM SUPPORT TEAM

Seeing the benefit to shelter volunteers, K9YA recently added a "Train the Trainer" (TTT) program at the LAAS North Central Shelter. Each three-week TTT program educates adult K9YA and LAAS volunteers together while training 15 shelter dogs. Goodsitt said, "We help

shelter volunteers become more skilled, so when they take K9YA dogs into the yard they can continue their training."

K9YA's staff wranglers are kept busy shuttling dogs in and out of their kennels to the on-site TTT classroom. Transporting dogs to offsite programs requires wranglers to bring the dogs from their shelter kennels to the van, get them in crates, shuttle them to the Boys & Girls Club, and reverse the process at the end of each day. The job requires extreme focus and safety. "Be mindful, be careful, move smoothly. Slow and steady wins the race," said Wendy "Eavie" Eav, K9YA's lead program assistant. "Once we unload the dogs, it's fun to watch the kids and volunteers handle the dogs. The dogs switch from being anxious to being excited in class. Their tails wag, their bodies loosen up, something lights up in their eyes, and their personalities shine."

Volunteers are key to running each program. Each student's dog is supervised by a volunteer mentor who has completed orientation,

training, and background checks. A few K9YA volunteers are professional dog trainers, including Lisa DeLarios, CPDT, who is also a cast member of the hit TV series “Storage Wars.” “Volunteering with K9YA is a great opportunity to sharpen my handling and training skills. I’m constantly hungry to learn and get better. It’s a true community of people who share compassion-based, positive reinforcement dog training. I’ve made great friends and we all get to help shelter dogs and kids. I love everything about the program.”

K9YA’S WORKING BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Osburn grew K9YA from a startup into an organization. She collaborates with a working board of directors. “There was no roadmap. We figured it out as we went along,” said Board President Emerita Rita Carton, an executive career coach and former executive with Disney and Mattel. “We’ve grown our abilities and means so that we now hold four programs per year.” Carton led the board for five years.

The board spearheads program development, strategy, outreach, and fundraising, which includes direct appeals and a variety of events, including K9YA Pub Trivia Contest, Drag Queen Bingo Night, a partnership with Hyatt’s The Shay Hotel, serving at the Genesis Invitational Golf Tournament, a K9YA running team at the Los Angeles Marathon, and participating with other L.A.-

based animal welfare organizations in the annual “Race for the Rescues.” The organization has earned GuideStar’s Silver Seal for financial transparency.

What’s next for K9 Youth Alliance? Working with the board’s grant-writing committee, board members and professional video makers Abril Calderon and Larry Kay are spearheading “K9YA Video Storytellers,” a video production curriculum for an additional team of students to learn video making alongside the K9YA student dog trainers. A grant proposal is pending.



*Larry Kay is a keynote speaker and best-selling author of award-winning books *Training the Best Dog Ever* and *The Big Book of Tricks for the Best Dog Ever*. Larry’s dog filmmaking awards include *Pet Product News Editor’s Choice Award* and *Dogster magazine’s Hero Award*. His videos have been viewed more than 100 million times on his popular *Positively Woof* Facebook page. Larry is a K9 Youth Alliance board member and youth mentor. Contact Larry at speak@positivelywoof.com. Website. www.LarryKay.com*

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