

Kids and Canines *Caring Together*

“Students and dogs learn together through positive motivational techniques.”

HALT-T program literature

Honey, a sweet sheltie mix, obediently trots beside her student caretaker on the lush lawn of the Sam Houston Memorial Museum in Huntsville. Suddenly, the docile dog spies a squirrel and darts away. No matter. She's quickly brought to heel and forgiven for her lapse into typical doggie behavior. After all, the gentle animal has earned a huge bank of redemption as a frequent visitor at area nursing homes. There, her manners always remain impeccable.

The HALT-T program—Humans and Animals Learning Together—Texas—revolves around second



Vet Liz Conces teaches the pet care portion of the HALT-T course.

chances. Since October 1995, the annual obedience training course has paired sets of students and dogs in a course that richly benefits both kids and canines. Huntsville veterinarian Liz Conces and canine obedience trainer Stephenie Anderson, along with shelter director Marjolein Lemmon and volunteer Betty Nicolay, started the program.

Selected from the local shelter, dogs meet HALT-T requirements if they show training potential and zero aggression. HALT-T instructors choose students from the Huntsville Alternative Challenge Program who are willing

Michael Delgado, under Stephenie Anderson's tutelage, commands Honey to sit using snacks and praise. "Instead of using brute force, you teach them that there is a way to win," the instructor explains.



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to commit. And to narrow the field they choose those who may especially benefit from the recognition.

"We're dealing with students who, for the most part, have not been successful in a traditional school," says principal Melinda Wooderson-Perzan. Reasons range from disciplinary to learning concerns, but poverty and other at-risk factors are problems too.

"Going into it, we were wondering what it was going to be like," says Liz, but HALT-T instructors discovered respectful children eager to learn. "All the kids are fantastic and wonderful to work with," the veterinarian says. "We get a lot back from them."

After they graduate, some dogs receive further training from the Texas Hearing and Service Dogs operation in Austin. There, four-footed helpers learn valuable skills such as how to alert the hearing-impaired to ringing phones or how to aid an owner in a wheelchair. HALT-T students write letters to the operation, inquiring about doggie graduates such as Midnight, who helps a double am-

putee coach Little League baseball. Other HALT-T dogs become pets in loving homes. As many as 500 dogs and cats find themselves at the Rita B. Huff Humane Society shelter each month; only 40 to 60 of those get adopted.



Canine obedience trainer Stephenie Anderson tells the kids about her own learning disability and how animals made a difference in her life.

The HALT-T selection team looks for mature animals, who often have less chance of adoption. For this session, Honey, along with canine companions Fred, Chip, and Cinnamon, win HALT-T slots.

Veterinarian Liz updates the animals' inoculations, starts them on heartworm preventative and neuters them, free of charge. Stephenie houses the dogs at her kennels, except for shelter mascot Honey.

"All dogs are trainable," declares Stephenie, who works with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice/Institutional Division. Dogs can find drugs, weapons, alcohol, termites, even detect seizures in people before they occur, she says. "They have the ability. The only thing that they lack is speech."

HALT-T kids don't say much, either, but it's safe to assume many



have suffered trying times. "I don't go to my house too much," says 15-year-old Michael Delgado, who lives with a friend. Most of his fellow students are from low-income families and limited social circles.

No matter. HALT-T gives each kid, like each dog, a fresh start. "We don't know their backgrounds at all, so we don't have any expectations," says volunteer Betty. "We all have one thing in common—love of dogs. That unconditional love [given by the dogs] is so important for those kids. Some of them don't experience enough of that."

When students teach such simple commands as sit and stay, they learn the value of positive reinforcement, perhaps for the first time. Or, as the HALT-T literature puts it, "The adolescents learn how to take control of their lives, how to lead instead of follow. They learn how to believe in themselves."

"I've learned how to take control of Fred and teach him what I want him to know," says student Tremekae Hill. "I've taught him to sit and how to lay down. To know I'm helping someone out [by helping to train a dog] makes me feel real good."

Students also profit from HALT-T's role models. "They see adults committed to something and that helps the kids make a commitment too," says principal Melinda. "The one thing that will make a difference with a kid is a personal relationship."

Says teacher Diane Ratliff. "A lot of people say they're going to do something, but these folks make it happen. They walk their talk."

Upon graduation, the students have learned pet care, responsibility, commitment, and the turning-point truth that someone cares

about them. For kids who may have known only life's hard knocks, this new-found knowledge goes a long way toward developing esteem. When Michael's photo appeared in a HALT-T article in the local paper, his friends teased him. "They called me the *estrella grande*, the big star," he grins.

"To me, all kids are going to learn," says Stephenie, who grew up with a learning disability and went on to earn a B.A. in criminal justice. "We learn at different rates and in different ways. Animals were my safeguard. They don't judge you. As long as you treat

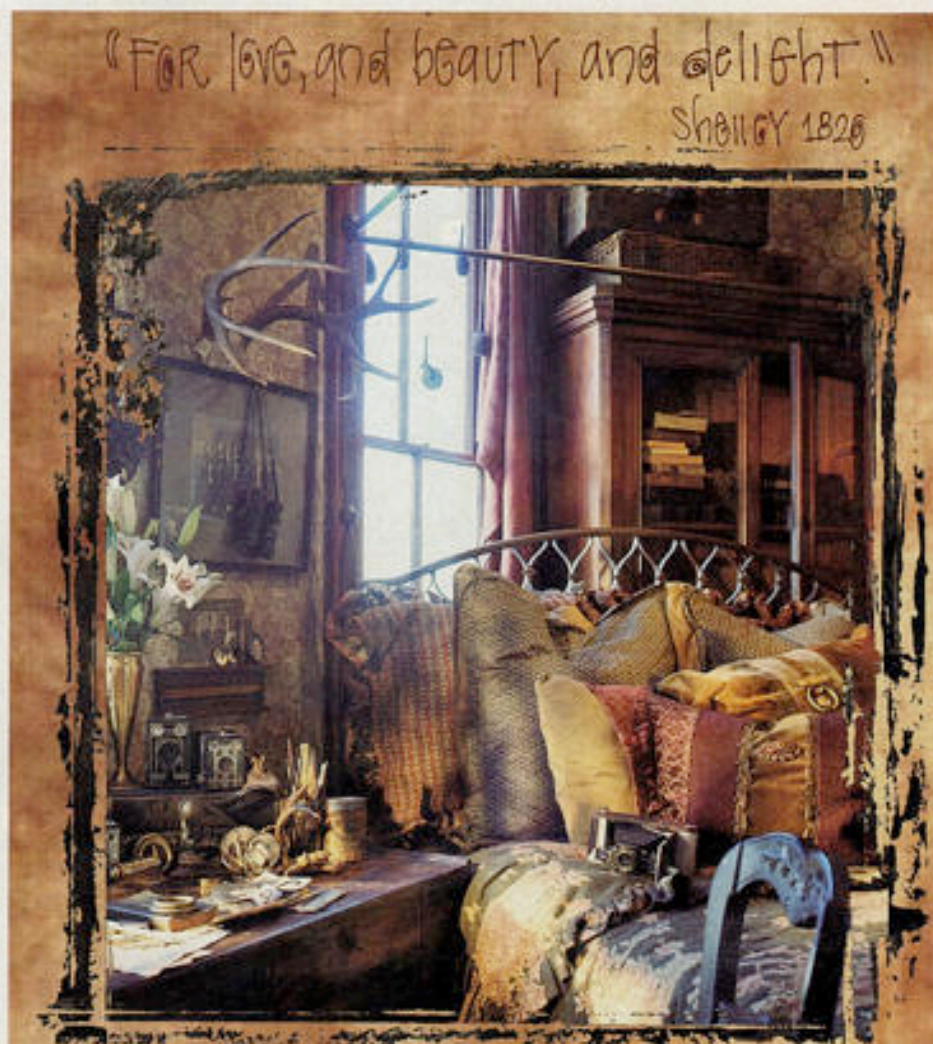
them fairly, they treat you fairly.

"And if you start young enough, you can shape wonderful behaviors in dogs," she adds. The same seems true for young minds as well.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

SOMETHING TO BARK ABOUT

To obtain additional information about HALT-T, write Dr. Liz Conces, 11th Street Veterinary Hospital, 1705 11th Street, Huntsville, TX 77340; or call (409) 293-8900.



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Tremekae Hill with Fred (left),
Michael Delgado with Honey (top step),
April Cunningham with Cinnamon, and
Derryck Collins with Chip have learned
commitment and responsibility through
the HALT-T program.