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Early on, she saw the power of healing in a dog and a boy

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JOAN DALTON often tells the young people she works with at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn, "Always follow your dream." Don't take a job you hate just for the money, she says. "Do what you love. Then you'll be happy at the end of the day."

If they doubt her, all they have to do is see Joan's example. Nearly every day Joan is at MacLaren, running the nonprofit Project POOCH program, which pairs incarcerated young men with unwanted shelter dogs. The youths take responsibility for the dogs, train them, help them overcome behavior problems and then oversee their adoption.

Project POOCH, says Susie Waki, a five-year-volunteer in the program, "is a shining example of the healing power of animals."

It's simple. The young men heal the animals. The animals help the young men heal. Each learns how to love. And Joan is there to make sure everyone learns the right lessons.

Joan says she never expected she'd end up working in corrections. She started out as a high school business teacher, then moved to New York to work for a publishing company.

She was surprised, she says, by how many people who lived in high-rise buildings had dogs.

She decided to do research. "I paid the doorman a dollar for every questionnaire he returned," Joan says. She learned the biggest reward to urban dog ownership "was responsibility. And patience, and humor. I tucked that away and came back to Portland."

Joan got a master's degree in school administration and looked for work. When she interviewed at MacLaren, "I thought, 'These are the same kids I taught yesterday, but they got in trouble last night.'"

She discovered few had high school degrees and many had not received much parenting. Joan remembered her research in animal ownership, and the idea for Project POOCH was born.

"POOCH," as Joan calls it, is a nonprofit organization that works on the grounds of the secure facility at MacLaren. "We have a partnership with the Oregon Youth Authority," she says.

A few generous contributors, especially the late Jean Vollum, gave seed money for a kennel to be built at MacLaren.

The learning started immediately. Program participants "actually built the original kennel," Joan says. "So they learned building skills."

Eleven youths are in the program at a time. Applicants must be recommended and are interviewed. Those with a history of animal abuse aren't considered.

They learn much more than how to train a dog, Joan says.

"We take dogs who are the most difficult for the shelters to place. We don't want an easy dog. We want the youth to be challenged, and learn responsibility and patience."

It's hard not to see parallels. A young man, who perhaps wasn't adequately parented, commits a crime and is locked up in a facility. Some, Joan says, receive no visitors.

And they're training dogs who've been locked up in a shelter because of bad behavior, who aren't wanted by families.

Program participants learn to train dogs using only positive reinforcement. They deal with and evaluate prospective families for the dogs they've come to love. They learn computer skills by preparing sample missing dog posters or writing essays about dogs. They learn social skills interacting with POOCH board members at receptions.

Joan is free with advice, as well. "I say, 'Don't be choosing your girlfriend like a lot of people choose dogs, by what they look like on the outside. It's the heart, it's the character.'

"I don't know if I'm making much progress in that area."

She supplements the learning by inviting volunteers to teach interview skills and provide job coaching. The youth also can earn certification in dog handling through correspondence courses.

The program works. Joan knows that because of the numbers: A researcher doing doctoral work studied the first 100 youths who participated in POOCH, "to see if any had returned to corrections. None of the 100 had."

Many have good jobs or are in college. One is in the pre-veterinary program at OSU.

Hundreds of dogs and young men have Joan to thank. Fourteen years ago, when she started the program, there was not enough money donated to provide a salary for Joan. So she sold her home to have money to live on while she got POOCH off the ground.

"I realized I had found my passion," she says. "I had to follow my dreams."

Year-round, in the rain, in the snow, in the heat, nearly seven days a week, she still has no regrets. "At the end of the day you're cold and wet, but they got out there and they worked and did everything they were supposed to do.

"And you think, 'It was a good day.' "

To contribute to or volunteer at Project POOCH, go to pooch.org.

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