

On the Positive Side: Critter Connection and Snooter Club youth have hearts for chained dogs

By Jean Gilbert

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Both Critter Connection kids and youth who are in the Snooter Club humane education programs know a thing or two about dogs. From a little Chihuahua dog named Snooter they learn about near-abandonment in our county, at the hands of a peddler who considers discarding her. As the story unfolds, the children delight in Snooter's good fortune, spared abandonment in the desert with a swift rescue by kind, loving people.

The children in these two programs know the significance of a caring, forever home for a dog like Snooter. With their awareness of spay-neuter (the derivation for the name "S-neuter"), the kids learn it is something really important and of enough magnitude to help all animals. It makes sense, they understand, when learning the role of guardian and responsible caretaker. They see that providing for an animal is much more than custodial or minimal care. They now see loving an animal involves more than being an owner.

Part of the humane education curriculum for Critter Connection and Snooter Club groups is a logical extension of this: the Dogs Deserve Better seasonal campaign "Have a Heart for Chained Dogs" (in its ninth year). The kids are participating for the third year in the important national campaign. They are making valentines that will be sent to residences identified with dogs that are chained 24/7, in the U.S., Canada, and England. The goal of the campaign this year is 17,000 valentines, which will be mailed along with Dogs Deserve Better pet care brochures and dog treat coupons. The objective is to reach (and teach) owners with a positive message, resulting in better living conditions and care for the animals. The kids are thrilled to help dogs in this way: a valentine is a nice reminder that dogs deserve better.

The valentines are creative, with heart-felt and endearing messages that capture the reader. "Treat dogs like you are a mother," declares one. "Love me. Don't freeze me outside in the cold," pleads another message. "Break the chain or you will break my heart," is the candid outcry of another youth.

The campaign has been extremely successful in raising awareness, helping hundreds of thousands of dogs get off chains. This change can be paired with positive actions including installing doggie doors where fencing exists, providing behavior assessment and appropriate training for dogs and re-homing relinquished dogs. Fencing can be erected or repaired (see Action Programs for Animals story on their website).

Unfortunately chaining is a pervasive practice in Las Cruces and Do a Ana County, as it is in other parts of the nation. We know the image: a chained dog unable to drink frozen water and forced to lie on frozen ground, or a dog without shade, forced to endure scorching sun and extreme heat. The dog paces neurotically from restricted mobility, or languishes from lack of attention. The images are vivid; they sicken us. And so it is incumbent of animal advocates, animal professionals, and all who care about dogs to educate the community to find ways to help animals in these circumstances and end the inhumane practice of chaining.

For more information about helping chained dogs or the "Have a Heart" campaign, go to www.dogsdeservebetter.org.

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