

**Shelter dogs' prison stay leads to new lives
Inmates in program serve as guardians during training
CARLOS ANDRES LÓPEZ
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LAS CRUCES - The odds were stacked against Skylar, Olive and Frankie.

But with a little help from a group of prisoners in southern New Mexico, the one-time shelter dogs each now have places they call home.

Skylar, a 3-year-old Shepherd mix, has found steady work at a drug treatment center for youth in Albuquerque. Olive, a 3-year-old Boxer mix, enjoys being spoiled by her owners. And Frankie, a 3-year-old Shepherd-Lab mix, has met the governor.

Two years ago, however, they were young strays living at the Animal Service Center of the Mesilla Valley. Each had spent about six to 12 months at the animal shelter before beginning new chapters of their lives at the Southern New Mexico Correctional Facility in 2015.

There, Skylar, Olive and Frankie were paired with prisoners in a program called Southern New Mexico PAWS, or Prisoners and Animals Working Toward Success.

The prisoners in the program assume roles as temporary guardians for the rescue dogs. While living at the prison, the dogs are trained by the prisoners on a daily basis for several weeks in basic obedience until they are deemed ready for adoption.

Skylar, Olive and Frankie are among program's many success stories.

"The PAWS program is really valuable for dogs, especially dogs like Skylar, who have been found on the streets and maybe put down at a shelter," said Jennifer Weiss-Burke, executive director of Serenity Mesa Youth Recovery Center in Albuquerque.

Weiss-Burke adopted Skylar in September 2015. "This program probably saved her life," she said.

Amy Orlando, the former Doña Ana County district attorney, adopted Frankie in October 2016.

"He's is the perfect dog, he has the best personality and he's such a lover," she said. "He's so well-mannered," she added, "they clearly treated him well. I think it's an amazing program. I wish that we could save more dogs this way. And ultimately, it benefits the prisoners as well."

Working toward success

The program has been heralded a success by its founder, Renee Waskiewicz, the manager of the Adult Probation and Parole Office in Las Cruces, and officials who facilitate the program from inside the prison.

To date, the program has resulted in the adoptions of 44 dogs — including three last week — who have successfully completed training.

Officials said prisoners involved in the program are less prone to misconduct. The prisoners must apply for admission into the program, and once admitted, they must stay on their best behavior. Any slip-up — drugs, fights or the like — would result in immediate expulsion from the program.

The program also is the first of its kind in New Mexico, Waskiewicz said.

She received approval for the program in 2013 after two decades of advocating for a prison-dog program.

"Several years ago, I just happened to be at the right place, at the right time. I was sitting next to the right person, at the right lunch, and I asked: 'What about a dog program?' And they said, 'Let's try it,'" she said.

It was eventually cleared through her supervisor and the director of adult prisons, she said.

Resistance to the dog program seemed to dissipate, Waskiewicz said, when prison administrators sought to give prisoners more opportunities to attain additional life skills.

"We can't just house these guys without teaching them anything," she said. "They get out on the street, they have no skills and they come back here again."

She added, "We have to give them something to give them pride in themselves, to teach them some kind of a skill. Even if they don't go out and train dogs, all of these men now have a feeling of compassion, sympathy and empathy."

By January 2015, the program was up and running, with Waskiewicz overseeing logistics from outside the prison. She was assisted by Nina Salcido-Marquez, the prison unit manager in charge of what has become known as the "dog pod"; lead trainer Doug Baker, who makes weekly trips to the prison to teach obedience lessons; and Sgt. Martin Espinoza, who oversees security for the pod.

Last month, the program partnered with ACTion Programs for Animals, which rescues a majority of its dogs from the Animal Service Center of the Mesilla Valley. APA then provides the program with rescue dogs.

There are currently 18 prisoners involved in the program, Salcido-Marquez said. Half are considered main handlers, who are the primary caregivers for the dogs; the other half are alternates, who fill-in for main handlers whenever needed. One dog is paired with one main handler, and the two share a cell in the dog pod, where all the prisoners in the program are housed. (The dogs each have kennels that are kept in the prisoners' cells.) "You go into that pod and you see tails wagging and smiles as the inmates play with their dogs," said Salcido-Marquez, who admitted that she was somewhat apprehensive about initiating a dog program. "But, we've come a long way in two years, and I see it has helped a lot of inmates and it has helped a lot of dogs."

Specifically, Salcido-Marquez has seen drastic improvements in conduct over the past two years, she said.

"In that pod — knock on wood — I don't have any fights or any issues," she said. The prisoners, she added, "are working together and they all get along."

On average, the dogs live and train with the prisoners over a period of about eight weeks, or as long as it takes for the dog to pass a temperament test.

"The goal is to train calm, friendly, relatively obedient family pets," Baker said.

Prison life

Prisoner Chris Williams has been involved in the program since the beginning.

Williams, 41, who is from Arizona, had been training Leyna, a 4-year-old Shepherd mix, for about a month when he spoke to the Sun-News in January.

"She coming along pretty good," he said. "She actually goes up to people and likes to be petted." She also enjoys playing catch with a ball, he said.

But that wasn't the case, he said, when she arrived at the prison in December 2016.

Abandoned by her owners, Leyna came into the program timid. "She was scared to meet new people, but she's warming up to everyone," he said. And she's quickly mastering basic commands.

Leyna is the 12th dog that Williams has trained in the program, he said. He's even trained a Chihuahua-weenie mix that his mother adopted. Another dog he trained, he said, ended up at service-dog school in California.

When Williams learned the prison was going to start a dog program, he said he applied immediately and even wrote a letter, he said. In the letter, he wrote that he grew up with dogs and that he "connects better with dogs and animals than people," he said.

Through the program, Williams said he has learned to become more calm and has gained a sense of responsibility, he said. But more notably, he said, "I'm doing something good for these dogs."

Two-year-old Sage, a brindle-colored mix, lived most her life at the shelter before she arrived at the prison in August 2016. Her handler is Fabian Lopez, 38, who has been in the program for about six months.

Lopez, an Albuquerque native, said the job of a handler involves constant work.

"Training sessions are an hour a day," he said, "but I'm with her all day. I'm constantly playing with her all day and teaching her how to do things."

Last month, Lopez said he was ready to see Sage find a permanent home. "She's really gentle and ready for it," he said.

'Great joy'

All the adopters who spoke to the Sun-News remarked on how well the dogs were trained.

Lonnie and Sharon Cunningham, who adopted Olive in March 2016, said their dog could respond to several commands. The couple highly recommends adopting through the program.

"Because," Lonnie Cunningham said, "the dog has been vaccinated, chipped and trained to heel. Also, the program allows you to meet several different dogs and pick the one you feel is best for your family."

Sharon Cunningham said Olive has brought "great joy" to their lives. "All in all," she told the Sun-News, "we have found it to be an extremely rewarding and humbling experience. We do love our silly dog."

For information on how to adopt through the program, contact Waskiewicz at Renee.Waskiewicz@state.nm.us or the ACTion Programs for Animals at mail@apalascruces.org.

Carlos Andres López can be reached 575-541-5453, carlopez@lcsun-news.com or [@carlopez_los](https://twitter.com/carlopez_los) on Twitter.