

Dog teaches girl new tricks

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SHELTON — Freckles, a 6-year-old pit bull, is content. She's sprawled on the floor in the Shelton animal shelter, taking refuge from the heat of a recent muggy day.

Brittany Forlenzo, 15, is pretty content, too, as she rubs Freckles' belly, her blonde, bobbed hair falling in her face.

It's a partnership that has paid dividends for both.

Forlenzo, finishing up her sophomore year at Shelton High School, has learning disabilities as well as behavioral problems, like verbalizing and interacting socially that can make high school tough to deal with.

Teacher Tracy Hussey, however, spent last summer putting together the program just for Forlenzo that has her come to the dog shelter every Friday afternoon.

"It's an incentive-based program," Hussey said, and unique to Forlenzo. "We tried to find something positive and work-related, but also give her a leadership role."

It works, Hussey said, motivating Forlenzo to accomplish goals set for her.

It is also a program that will prepare Forlenzo for a work experience program that provides on-site job training that she will eventually enter.

"This is kind of a prerequisite for her," Hussey said, and Forlenzo will be able to go into a work program in the animal field.

Forlenzo nods her head when asked if she plans on working with animals when her schooling is done.

Ask her what her favorite part of high school is, and she'll tell you it's her Friday trips to the animal shelter.

Forlenzo and Freckles took to each other right away, said Animal Control Officer Cheryl Taylor, and the pit bull is the only dog she works with.

"She waits patiently for Brittany to arrive," Taylor said. The dog's mood is noticeably different if the van arrives and Forlenzo isn't on it, she said.

Taylor said Freckles has been at the shelter a long time.

"She had way too many puppies," Forlenzo said. "I like her."

People would come and look at Freckles, but no one was ready to adopt her.

Until, that is, Forlenzo started working with her.

"Her behavior has changed because of Brittany," Taylor said. "Brittany has been here in the rain and cold and heat."

Freckles will be adopted soon, but not before the school year ends, she said.

Taylor said the adoptive family, upon learning of the unique arrangement, was willing to wait until the end of school before taking Freckles home with them.

Forlenzo shakes her head "yes" when asked if she'll miss Freckles. "I like playing with her with the ball," Forlenzo said quietly, her eyes focused on Freckles, who soon sniffs out a dog treat tucked away in Forlenzo's pocket. The dog is rewarded when she sits and gives Forlenzo her paw.

She got a chance to show her peers at school what she does at the dog shelter when Taylor brought Freckles to school recently.

Forlenzo smiled when the visit is brought up, twisting Freckle's leash in her hands.

Forlenzo said she plans to keep in touch with the family that is adopting Freckles, but hasn't picked out what dog she'll work with once Freckles leaves.

Since she's starting working at the shelter, Forlenzo has also started helping out the dog groomer next door to Karen's Kitchen, her mother's restaurant, taking dogs there for a walk.

"It's been good for everyone all around," Taylor said. "We'll have another miracle for her to work with in September."

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