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Youths learn to protect pit bulls

Program teaches positives, not fighting, for the dogs.

By Karen Sullivan

Posted: Sunday, Nov. 30, 2008



Gunny is the ambassador for Charlotte's "Celebrate Your Pit" campaign. FILE PHOTO

The Humane Society of the United States is recruiting Charlotte youths who own pit bulls for a program designed to end street-level dogfights.

The agency and its partners will offer 13- to 22-year-olds a free, eight- to 10-week class to fight a national problem on the local level.

Charlotte is the second city after Chicago chosen for the program. It teaches owners to train pets for obedience, agility and other positive behavior rather than fighting.

The Charlotte kickoff for the End Dogfighting campaign is called Celebrate Your Pit. The event will be held at noon on Dec. 13 at the Stratford Richardson YMCA, 1946 West Blvd.

Neighborhoods near the YMCA are among those where local officials see evidence of dogfights, said Vickie Hughes, lead coordinator for the End Dogfighting campaign.

Those neighborhoods are by no means the only ones. "The problem exists in all parts of Charlotte," Hughes said. "There are more heavily concentrated areas, but it's not just one area."

Animal Care & Control has taken in nearly 9,400 dogs since July. Most were strays, and about 24 percent, or about 2,200, were pit bulls. About half of those pit bulls had injuries or scars that are commonly associated with dog fighting.

These include wounds or scars on their faces, ears, necks and front legs.

Street-level dogfights can occur on a vacant lot, a street corner or elsewhere. Aggressive fighting dogs can be a source of entertainment and status. "It's not big money," Hughes said. "It's youth who want to show that they have the bigger, badder dog."

Organizers also are working with churches to promote the program. They also have recruited pit bull owners from the Amay James neighborhood to serve as advocates against dog fighting.

"I love animals, and I don't want to be around dog fighting," said Sharima Harmon, 19. "After the Michael Vick case, it's become more and more popular. Kids think it's cooler."

She and her brother, Harvey, signed up because they wanted to help change perceptions about .

The guest speaker will be Tio Hardimon, who started the Humane Society's first End Dogfighting campaign in Chicago. Hardimon also is taking his program to Atlanta.

The goal is to change the perception that pit bulls are supposed to be fighting dogs, Hughes said.

"That's a myth," Hughes said. "We're trying to catch (children while they are) young and convince them otherwise."

The Charlotte program's ambassador is Gunny, a pit bull that escaped or was abandoned, apparently by owners who involved him in dog fighting. Gunny was the subject of an Observer story in June, documenting his adoption and recovery from injuries. He had a leg amputated and other surgery. The scars on his body led caregivers to believe he was used as bait to stir rage in fighting dogs. Gunny is gentle and lacks a fighter's temperament.

Classes to discourage youth from using their pets for fighting begin in January. Participants can bring their pets. Organizers plan to offer classes in other communities. Raising money for the program will be important for expansion.

The Humane Society of the United States has contributed half the budget for the Charlotte program, about \$50,000. Local agencies are responsible for the remaining amount.

"It's starting at Amay James," Hughes said. "We're going to talk about the training. We'll have some food and drinks. Gunny will be there. He is perfect for us to show this is what could happen."

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PBFan wrote on 11/30/2008 07:13:48 PM:

I forgot to mention, if you would like to learn more about Gunny's story, please visit www.northmecklenburganimalrescue.org and click on "follow Gunny's story". There has been a blog written since the day he was rescued. Newest entries at the top...scroll down to the bottom read from the beginning. It is quite a story!

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Actually, in Chicago, kids who had fought their dogs in the past have attended the program...and have turned their outlook completely around. They now go out and educate others in the neighborhoods as to why they should never start fighting, or stop if they have already started. So, yes, it has been effective outside of "the choir". And just to dispell a stereotype one more time, Pitbulls that have been raised to fight other dogs do not automatically have issues with humans. In fact, the breed has been bred NOT to bite a human, even in the middle of a dog fight. You won't be getting any "justice" by tossing a dog in the ring with his owner...these dogs will die to please their leader, thus the reason they are chosen to go through this hell. As far as the original Gunny article, I tried the link from the original story and it was "no longer available". The same writer, Karen Sullivan, wrote that story as well. Maybe it is archived somewhere? Thanks for the support!!

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Firsthuman wrote on 11/30/2008 04:19:57 PM:

Don't worry about the idiot commentary. There's always that 10 percent of losers. Just focus on the positive and they don't matter. Good work to change perceptions, because usually perceptions get more press than what is actually going on. Glad to see this program.

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zakkfan wrote on 11/30/2008 02:46:04 PM:

It's a shame how the Internet provides people the opportunity to show their ignorance and general stupidity to the entire world. What a STUPID comment and waste of time! This is a GREAT program! Way to go!!!!

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tmsfits wrote on 11/30/2008 01:54:35 PM:

Wonderful idea...but i think it preaches to the choir...the thug kids we need to reach are the very ones who think dog fighting is even cooler after the Vick publicity...a better approach might be to toss the thug kids in a ring with a group of fighting dogs they've created and trained...much more effective and might be entertaining to watch too!

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smcclung wrote on 11/30/2008 12:52:14 PM:

At last, instead of reactive kill the dog, how about educating owners and particularly the youths who think maiming a dog is cool. Proactive, protect the dog...finally!

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nckitty wrote on 11/30/2008 11:51:30 AM:

This is such a great program! Hopefully the kids that attend this program will be able to spread the message to others in their neighborhoods about taking better care of their animals. Thanks for telling us about this program. I would also like to see a link to the original story about Gunny.

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Nikita07 wrote on 11/30/2008 11:47:21 AM:

This is a great idea.

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morninglory wrote on 11/30/2008 08:29:26 AM:

What a wonderful idea! I do hope it will help change the perception that pits are naturally aggressive animals that only want to fight. Hopefully the kids will also educate the adults in their lives that these dogs just want to be loved and needed, like any other breed.

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