

THE OREO THAT CAN BITE, TOO!

By

Dortell Williams

It's been thirty long years since I have experienced the beauty of a dog. That changed four years ago when the LA-based Karma Rescue Organization integrated their program into ours, and created Paws For Life, here at the state prison in Los Angeles County.

Oreo was his name. Jon, a new trainer, was sitting on the yard petting Oreo, a gorgeous black and white lab with an out-going personality. Excited witless, I made the mistake of approaching Jon from behind and resting my hand on his shoulder. Oreo didn't take too kind to that and went from beautiful and relaxed to protective mode in less than a second. Oreo darted at me and the chase was on! Having seen the nature of Oreo before hand, fear didn't even enter the

picture. I also knew Jon had good control of Oreo. What I did feel was the thrill of the chase. I hadn't been chased by a dog since I was a teen. I was forty-seven when I met Oreo.

Fortunately for me, his six-foot leash saved the day, and my tail. As Jon corrected Oreo, it was a lesson for us both. I learned to never approach a dog from behind, especially if I haven't been introduced to the dog.

Oreo didn't stay long before he was trained and adopted. He turned out to be quite a winner. Since Oreo graduated and earned his Canine Good Citizenship Certificate, 161 other dogs have gone through the program. Some dogs have been driven in from the devastating 2016 California wildfires, while others have been flown in from that terribly destructive disaster that was dubbed Hurricane Harvey. And, of course, they've also come from every other part of the country, abused, injured and traumatized.

It's incredible how magical prison can be for dogs. They come in injured and frightened, and depart healthy, well trained and happy-go-lucky. Kudos to the dog trainers as well. I've seen dogs accomplish feats I didn't know dogs were capable of. Mallie can recognize written commands and will come, sit, and lay down when she sees the appropriate sign. Ollie, a golden lab, opens and closes doors on command and Doug kneels for prayer when asked. Oh, and Sarge, the latest black lab, will hit the light switch on and off for you.

Don't get me wrong, in my attempt at brevity I don't mean to imply that these are one-trick Canines. Not hardly. The Paws For Life dogs go through a 12-week certification program, absorbing about thirty commands, while the service dogs, which are trained to help military veterans diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder cope, learn about sixty commands. It is utterly amazing what these dogs can do!

Their human trainers seem to learn even more. Guys I've known for decades to be non-morning persons, are up at 5:00 a.m. eager to train. Guys who I know were too young to be employed before their arrest are now keeping logs, passing intensive training tests and writing detailed reports.

Yes, it's been thirty years since I last pet a dog, held a dog or experienced dog breath, but Paws For Life located here on the Progressive Programming Facility, has made every second of that wait worth while.