



Photos by ELIZABETH FLORES • eflores@startribune.com

"I want to go to college to help dogs," said Martin, 17, with Harry, both part of a program at Boys Totem Town. The goal is to teach boys responsibility and discipline by having them teach dogs responsibility and discipline. The boys have a range of felony-level offenses; the dogs have been deemed unfit for adoption.

# Cross training

**When young delinquents train troubled dogs in a St. Paul treatment program, both can gain skills and a chance for a brighter future.**



Nate, 17, said he immediately felt attached to Robbin, a collie. Said another participant in the St. Paul program: "My dog listens to what I tell him. Sometimes he gets unruly, but that's just what a dog does."

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**S**hane, an abused Doberman from Pennsylvania, sat at attention at the feet of his trainer. Eric, a delinquent 18-year-old from Minnesota, knelt to the floor with a treat in his hand, urging the dog to lie down.

It took several times before the dog's belly hit the floor. When it did, the boy smiled, gave him the treat and tousled his head. It was an accomplishment for both.

Eric is participating in the Renaissance Program at Boys Totem Town, a juvenile treatment institution in St. Paul. Boys who come from rough-and-tumble backgrounds are teaching dogs who come from rough-and-tumble backgrounds how to become therapy animals.

**Training continues:** Dogs come from sanctuary. **B5** ▶

# Cross training for boys and dogs

## ◀ TRAINING FROM B1

The theory is, by teaching dogs the skills and discipline the boys are trying to learn, the boys will improve their own behavior faster, said superintendent Tom McGinn.

The young men at Totem Town have been sent there by the judicial system. Their crimes cover a range of felony-level offenses, and the facility gives them a chance to get back on track.

The dogs have been deemed unfit for adoption. Some are disabled, others are old. Many have been abused and neglected and written off as too wild. They have been given a second chance at Home for Life, an animal sanctuary in western Wisconsin that lets the animals live out their lives in peace.

While the sanctuary provides a safe place to live, it also has a mission of community service, says founder Lisa LaVerdiere.

About 300 people volunteer at Home for Life, and many go with the dogs to visit domestic abuse shelters, nursing homes and hospitals.

"Just because a dog's been given up on, it can still go out

and contribute, and these dogs can help folks who are in worse off shape," LaVerdiere said.

Apparently, that includes delinquent boys.

LaVerdiere approached McGinn about having Totem Town residents teach dogs that had the potential to go out in public and make people smile. "We say we help at-risk dogs and at-risk people," LaVerdiere said.

### Shared need

At first, McGinn wasn't sure how it would fit. But, he said, it didn't take long to see the parallels between what the dogs need to learn and what his students are doing. The program is in its second session, and by McGinn's account has been successful.

Five students meet with the dogs twice a week for eight weeks, and during the program they'll also take field trips to observe different careers involving animals — from the University of Minnesota veterinary program to doggie hydrotherapy. To participate in the training program, the teens have to apply and go through an interview process.

### ABOUT HOME FOR LIFE

Home for Life is a no-kill animal sanctuary in western Wisconsin. Animals deemed unfit for adoption come from across the nation to live out their lives at the facility. Some are trained to be therapy animals, providing a friendly face to people in nursing homes, hospitals and domestic abuse shelters. For more information, go to [www.homeforlife.org](http://www.homeforlife.org).

It's a way to teach the boys something new and to push them out of their comfort zones, said Jayme Brisch, a community corrections worker.

At the end of the program, the teens run their dogs through the Therapy Dogs International certification test. Dogs that pass can then go out into the community. And their teen trainers can boast about new skills.

But first, LaVerdiere said, she has to teach the teens how to gently teach the dogs. It's like teaching a 4-year-old how to tie

shoes, she tells the teens. Hitting won't help, but showing them how and praising them will.

Dogs are great barometers, LaVerdiere said. "They give instant feedback. If the boys are positive and work hard, the dogs will respond."

Eric, who had no prior experience with dogs, said he's catching on.

"My dog listens to what I tell him," Eric said. "Sometimes he gets unruly, but that's just what a dog does."

That's the kind of patience and understanding McGinn wants to see. Empathy is something most Totem Town residents lack, he says. "But it's an important lesson for them to learn."

Niko, an 18-year-old who works with Tiger, a German shepherd mix, knows his dog is going to take some more coaching. That's OK with him.

"I'm glad to see the dog can look forward to live another day and not give up hope," Niko said.

It's not just about the dogs, he added. It's nice, he said, to know that he's helping to give other people, people who have it harder than he does, something to look forward to each day.

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