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Offenders raise adoption fees to donate deaf dog to Missouri School for the Deaf

Offenders at the South Central Correctional Center (SCCC) in Licking not only gave Zeus a second chance at life, they also made sure he was going to a good home where he will help others. Zeus, a male, deaf Dachshund, was donated to the Missouri School for the Deaf in Fulton. The adoption fees were paid for by the offenders.

Zeus was born deaf. The birth defect rendered him useless to the breeder and his future was uncertain, at best. The Dachshund ended up at an animal rescue shelter where his handicap plagued any chance for adoption. The shelter reached out to SCCC, which participates in the Department of Corrections’ (DOC) Puppies for Parole program. The program pairs rescued dogs with offenders at prisons throughout the state for training in order to make them more adoptable.

When the shelter approached SCCC about taking Zeus in for the eight-week training session, the offender handling team was more than willing to accept the challenge of helping the dog overcome his disability. In preparation, the handlers met with deaf offenders at SCCC to learn sign language. The offenders devised a plan that would teach the Dachshund how to respond to commands with the use of sign language.

“Surprisingly, within the first week Zeus had the command ‘sit’ picked up,” said Tina Holland, SCCC institutional activity coordinator. “We couldn’t use a dog whistle as a training tool because he couldn’t hear it. The offenders figured out how to train Zeus by stomping the ground with their feet. He could feel the vibrations from the floor. Once he recognized what the vibrations meant, he picked up one command after another.”

Holland said the offenders used treats as positive reinforcement because Zeus also suffered from severe anxiety. After the dog’s training was complete, the offenders got together and decided they wanted Zeus sent to a school for the deaf so he could help others. They made that possible by raising and donating the adoption fees.

“It was really rough on them (the offender handlers) when he left,” Holland said. “This was a huge accomplishment for them. It’s truly an inspirational story.”

Puppies for Parole is funded by donations only and does not receive state funding. The dogs’ training consists of a two-month period in which they learn verbal commands and general obedience. The offenders and the dogs go through the rehabilitative process together. The culmination of the training is the graduation ceremony at the end of the eight weeks, during which time the dogs are administered a K-9 Good Citizenship Test they must pass. Offender trainers gain vocational skills and learn responsibility through the program. It also offers offenders the opportunity to repay the community. On February 1, 2010, Jefferson City Correctional Center received the first dog through Puppies for Parole. There are currently 75 dogs in training at 10 of the DOC’s institutions. For many of the dogs that are selected for the program, it allows them a

second chance, if not their only chance, to find a home. Since its inception, approximately 150 dogs have been saved from euthanization and have been adopted out.