



Rusty's Story

Senior Dog Rescue of Oregon and the young women on Aspen Unit of the Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility designed Canines at the Creek. From the beginning the program has been a runaway success for one reason: Rusty, the dog that led the way and continues to inspire and educate us all.

Canines at the Creek has two main goals. (1) to enhance adoptability of senior dogs by providing foster care, obedience training, and socialization; (2) to help provide the youth on Aspen Unit with the skills needed to succeed when they return to society. In caring for Rusty, the young residents of Aspen Unit have the opportunity to learn and practice the life skills to be successful in the future.

This story is about the incredible bond forged by Rusty, a Chesapeake/Lab mix, and the young women on Aspen Unit at Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility. One of three units at Oak Creek, Aspen houses 25 girls and young women, many whose release dates are years away.

Background

Imagine being a teenager again, a time when your focus should be on passing Algebra and hoping you'll get your driver's license. Instead, life goes horribly off track and you find yourself incarcerated with 25 others at a locked facility where every moment is watched, every day regimented. Each morning you awake to the reality that you have many, many more days before you will ever return to a "normal" life. You know your family may not call, write or show up on visiting day. It's easy to lose hope.

Next imagine being a 10 year old dog who finds himself abandoned and hungry on the streets. A ride in the animal control truck ends at a concrete cage in a shelter. At first, you rush to the gate each time you hear someone approach, convinced it will be your family -- but it never is. One day at mealtime, a sweet young staff person pats your head and says, "Euthanasia is the kindest thing for you, old boy". You watch her walk away. Then you curl up in the corner of your run. Hope is gone.

Rusty's story

Rusty arrived at Aspen Unit in the fall of 2009 to begin his new life as the first dog enrolled in Canines at the Creek. Within days, staff notes mention "a remarkable mellowing of the atmosphere in the unit and the girls' behavior". Security personnel report fewer calls from Aspen and point out remarkable improvement in some of the most difficult residents.

Rusty has an instinctive ability to calm agitated behavior, buoy up a sad demeanor and, when necessary, to put himself in a place where he can't be ignored. Staff journals show that morale and behavior of the residents continue to improve each day Rusty is on the unit. Residents who previously refused to leave their beds rush out to feed and walk the big brown dog. It is clear that Rusty's presence has a profoundly positive effect on the young women in Aspen and on the entire Oak Creek program. One resident relates how Rusty pushed open the door of a staff office to tend to a young woman in crisis. Shooed out by staff, Rusty immediately returned to stand stubbornly at the young woman's side even though he knew he was breaking rules by being in that office.

This gentle dog is one in a million. Like a parent who instinctively knows which child needs attention, Rusty cares for "his" girls. He is a master at recognizing sadness, calming an agitated girl and knowing the difference. Even during the most dangerous situations when an out-of-control youth is taken down by staff, Rusty stays calm and close by. He knows his place is not in the midst of the chaos, but as a comfort to the girls afterwards. He is at his best when he quietly places himself within touching distance of girls who need reassurance but are timid about approaching him.

Because Rusty has such an extraordinary impact on the lives of the young women on Aspen Unit, he has been granted permanent status at Oak Creek and will live out this life with "his" girls. His title is Therapy Dog but he is so much more to these young women: a symbol that spring will come again in their lives. He is their life-line in times of trouble. In return, he has been given a second chance for a new life filled with the wonder of young people.

We nominate Rusty for his healing of the young women on Aspen Unit, for his discernment in seeing each person's vulnerabilities and responding in-kind, and for his unflagging determination to care for each of "his" girls.

Senior Dog Rescue of Oregon (SDRO) Introduction:

Rusty is a rescue dog that was placed at the Oak Creek Correctional Facility last year as the first dog in their foster program called Canines At The Creek. Rusty proved to be so successful as a therapy dog for the residents of Aspen Unit that he was granted permission by Oak Creek administration to remain on the unit, and was placed into permanent foster care by SDRO.

At the annual conference of the Oregon Veterinary Medical Association at OSU, Rusty was inducted into the Oregon Animal Hall of Fame as 2010 Oregon Companion Pet of the Year. Rusty was present at the luncheon along with Elizabeth, one of the young women from Aspen who cares for Rusty.

Huge thanks go to Dr. Sabra Thomas who willingly sponsored Rusty for this award. Huge thanks also to Ange Crawford who wrote "Rusty's story", one of the most eloquent stories I have ever read. In announcing Rusty's award, Dr. Boggs read his story verbatim and there were very few dry eyes in the room. Thanks also to Barbara Spreadbury. Her beautiful photograph of Rusty which accompanied his nomination was compelling and expressive and tells much about this extraordinary dog.

Attached is a photo of Rusty and TJ White taken shortly after he was inducted into the Hall of Fame. TJ was Rusty's first foster home. She is the one person who evaluated him thoroughly and said "this is the dog for Oak Creek!"

SDRO has much to be proud of in Rusty. He is a wonderful ambassador for senior dogs everywhere!

