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Who Let the Dogs In? Dog Training in Prison

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[00:00:00] **x:** K A L W.

[00:00:11] **Ivy:** Hey, hey, welcome to Uncuffed. I'm Anthony Stick Talk Ivy from Solano's side, here today with my guys.

[00:00:19] **b.f.:** I'm b.f. Thames.

[00:00:20] **Mazza:** Jay Evans.

[00:00:21] **Jay:** I'm Bryan Mazza. And this down here on the floor is Bella.

[00:00:28] **Ivy:** And that's right, we got a dog in here. We'll talk about that a little later. So, speaking of pets, have y'all had a pet growing up?

[00:00:35] **b.f.:** My family has had pets growing up. We had dogs and cats. We always had mutts. So, you couldn't really identify them.

[00:00:42] **Jay:** I had a pet growing up. We had a German shepherd dog. First dog was probably when I was like six or seven years old. And my dad told me if, he gave me the dog, that it would be my responsibility to clean up after it, wash it, [00:01:00] and all that type of things and walk it. But you know how that go, when you're a little kid, you want to play with it all day and then the other part it, falls on the parents. So they should have know better to even purchase the dog for me.

[00:01:13] **Ivy:** Growing up, I think the only pet that was allowed in my house was a dog.

My mom, she's so scared of everything. She's scared of cats, rabbits. So the only thing that was allowed in our house was a dog.

[00:01:28] **b.f.:** And why'd she allow the dog?

[00:01:30] **Ivy:** I don't know. She just was able to, I guess, be comfortable with the dog.

[00:01:36] **Jay:** Why is your mom afraid of rabbits?

[00:01:38] **Ivy:** I don't know. She said it's too close to a rat.

[00:01:42] **Mazza:** Ha ha ha, that's funny.

[00:01:45] **Ivy:** She said it's too furry, and it don't have no bones.

[00:01:48] **Mazza:** She said all that?

[00:01:49] **Jay:** It's definitely furry with some big, big ears.

[00:01:54] **b.f.:** I mean, their eyes are a little creepy, but they're nice, man.

[00:01:58] **Mazza:** Growing up out on [00:02:00] Bethel Island, we always had animals around. Cats, dogs. One of my best friends in life was Busby.

He was a Labrador shepherd mix with Husky in him. And Busby was my best friend, and I still miss him to this day. And to tell you the truth, out there on Bethel Island, we lived right next to a pond. So we had, there was ducks and geese and frogs and snakes and, and, I always had animals around. It was a veritable Dr. Doolittle experience out there on Bethel Island. But, my best friend in the world was that dog, Busby, and, they've always been, you know, a big part of my life.

[00:02:39] **b.f.:** So, Bryan, you got a dog here today.

[00:02:43] **Mazza:** Yeah, all the jingling and jangling you hear is...

[00:02:46] **b.f.:** She's pretty active.

[00:02:47] **Mazza:** She is.

[00:02:47] **b.f.:** Who do you got here?

[00:02:47] **Mazza:** She's a seven month old Golden Retriever Black Lab mix named Bella.

And she's very, very smart. She's very willful, and she's one of our guests today.

[00:02:58] **Ivy:** So, Mazza, you actually did an [00:03:00] interview about this program and training dogs with Mike Duran, right?

[00:03:06] **Mazza:** Yeah, Mike. Big Mike. Mike had been my neighbor for, like, five years in the building, and we both applied for this program, and he got chosen as well.

And the idea came to me, it was like, well. You know, I was part of Uncuffed, and I wanted to tell a story about the program as well, so I, I, I pitched it as being a story about this guy's progress through the program, and maybe, you know, the process of him training the dog, and so the people would know about the program here in the prison.

[00:03:38] **Ivy:** So, Mazza, tell me a little bit about this program.

[00:03:41] **Mazza:** The program is primarily a program that creates service dogs that work with diabetics, PTSD dogs that work with first responders, there's trauma dogs that work with the police department, and there's Love on Leashes, that is for children that have lived through trauma [00:04:00] and are at risk, suicide survivors.

These dogs are... trained to be calm. They're trained to be attentive to their handlers, their owners. They serve a purpose in the public.

[00:04:15] **Ivy:** Okay, this is something I would like to know. So you said these dogs are trained to do all these different things. Is this Paws On A Mission training them all of them different things, or?

[00:04:26] **Mazza:** Our specialty is obedience. The fundamentals of being a dog. Many of them come in here, they don't know sit, stay, stand, wait, come. They don't even know their own name. So, our basic primary objective is to make these dogs prepared for finished training, because we can't do scent training here in the prison, because there's just way too much going on in the building.

[00:04:48] **Ivy:** Well, I asked you that because, I was actually in a dog program in Corcoran State Prison.

[00:04:55] **Mazza:** I remember that.

[00:04:56] **Ivy:** And it was called Positive Change. Our primary [00:05:00] objective was to get dogs that was in shelters, basically like battered dogs, and train them to get an owner.

[00:05:09] **b.f.:** As companion animals?

[00:05:10] **Ivy:** Yes.

[00:05:11] **b.f.:** Okay.

[00:05:11] **Mazza:** Yeah, that's different.

We are creating dogs that are going to be with clients that have medical issues, PTSD issues and whatnot.

[00:05:20] **Ivy:** Well, enough said. Press play on that dial. Let's, let's hear the story.

[00:05:36] **Mike:** The main reason I applied for the program was... I felt it was a way that I can give back. You know, if I can train, help train an animal that goes to somebody to help them, whatever their needs are, whether it's a service dog or, I've been told some of the dogs get trained to detect when somebody's having issues with their diabetes and stuff like that.

I destroyed a lot of lives when I committed my crime. [00:06:00] You know, and if this is some small way that I can help give back to society, I figured I'd give it a shot. And I imagine it's going to be, it's probably somewhat of a challenge, you know, not only for, to train the dog, but for myself.

[00:06:16] **Mazza:** So you, you grew up having a love for animals, right?

[00:06:19] **Mike:** Yeah. We've always, you know, we've always had dogs.

I went through the whole fish stage and hamster stage, and... but primarily dogs, we had a lot of dogs over the years.

[00:06:30] **Mazza:** So these animals that we're going to meet in the near future, these animals are gonna be, you know, service animals to those in need that we talked about briefly. Do you believe that, in your heart, that dogs can heal?

[00:06:45] **Mike:** I believe it can, I mean, you see things where they say that, you know, people and dogs have been working together for thousands of years. I believe, you know, and I've seen things where they'll take, you know, a dog into a hospital, a children's [00:07:00] hospital, or an old folks home, and you can almost just see the life come back to, you know, people in those situations, whether it's a child with a terminal disease, or, you know, somebody in their 90s or 100s whose...

[00:07:14] **Mazza:** In the twilight of their life.

[00:07:16] **Mike:** Yes.

[00:07:18] **Mazza:** There's going to be an eventuality where this dog that you're going to get, you're going to have to say goodbye. How do you think you're going to deal with that?

[00:07:31] **Mike:** I honestly don't really know until the first time that, that happens. Even though there's a close relationship with the animal, it's a different type of relationship.

It'd be in my mind would be the fact that this was never my dog to begin with. Not to sound callous about it, but it... I look at it like being a job.

[00:07:49] **Mazza:** Let's say... You've been with this dog for about a week. And the dog was doing this interview. What do you think the dog would think of you? [00:08:00]

[00:08:01] **Mike:** Well, I would like to hope that he would think I was a good guy.

[00:08:07] **Mazza:** A couple of days after talking to Mike, I went down to C Yard, to Building 18. That's where Paws On A Mission had turned part of a housing unit into a living and training area for the 9 to 12 dogs who are part of the program.

When you walk into Building 18, there is... it's an open area with bunks, rows after rows of bunks. Now as I walk through the building, I find myself in the kennel area, which is an expanded fence. Bunks have been removed, and racks have been put in, installed, and we've got 2 4 6, 8 10 12. What they characterize as [00:09:00] crates that you put your pet in.

It's a clean area. It has its charts on the wall where everybody can keep track of who's doing what with, with their dogs. Relieving schedules, feeding schedules. You have your clipboards where you, if you are training a dog, you log the activities of the day.

As I walk outside.... Directly in front of the building there's been a fenced in enclosure which is the outside kennel area, and it's the Paws On A Mission outside kennel. It's got a dirt area which is covered with bark for the dogs to play on. It's a professional setup. It's got an outside water source. It's comfortable for the dogs, in the sun.[00:10:00]

A couple of months into Mike's time with the Paws On A Mission program, I checked in with him to see how it was going.

Well, they've obviously given you a dog. Tell me a little bit about this dog.

[00:10:15] **Mike:** The dog that I, I handled generally in the evenings or after 2:30 is Robbie. He's a Golden Retriever.

Generally speaking, does what he's supposed to do when he's supposed to do it. He's very, very mellow. He's easy to train. He's smart, that's for sure, when he's not being lazy.

[00:10:35] **Mazza:** Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, fair enough. Explain to me what your favorite part of being with Robbie is. What do you like teaching him, what's your favorite activity?

[00:10:46] **Mike:** Really just about any of them. Last night I had him out in the free play area, and he's got this favorite little squeaky chew toy. I'll throw it, he'll take off running, grab it, he'll bring it back, and I'll throw it again, and I can [00:11:00] call him, and he'll come back, and just play fetch with him for about ten minutes, and that's always fun.

[00:11:07] **Mazza:** So, what have you learned? What has Robbie taught you?

[00:11:13] **Mike:** Robbie has continued to teach me patience. You know, sometimes you gotta use a little bit of kibble to get him to act right, but other than that, he's not a bad dog at all.

[00:11:24] **Mazza:** For the two months or so, I would see Mike and Robbie walking around the yard, practicing what is known as foundation training.

Foundation training is sit, heal, stay, the basic fundamentals that every dog needs to know to be a good dog, in the house, and in service. But then one day, Mike came into the studio, and Robbie was gone.

Last time we met in April, but there's a lot of things that have happened. Where's Robbie? What happened?

[00:11:55] **Mike:** The word we're getting is Robbie will probably be medically retired. Robbie had gone out with several [00:12:00] other dogs for an evaluation, and then he started having these issues of vomiting, so they've medically retired Robbie, and they're gonna see if there was medical need to see what they can find that may be causing this problem.

[00:12:17] **Mazza:** So, since you, you lost Robbie, what has happened since then?

[00:12:25] **Mike:** The decision was made to give me River, and that's the dog that I have now.

[00:12:29] **Mazza:** And what breed is River, for those that are listening out there?

[00:12:33] **Mike:** River is a Black Lab. He's about 10 months old. Very good dog. He's very, very smart, very energetic.

Likes to run, likes to play, likes having attention.

Always nosing into things, and...

[00:12:51] **Mazza:** he's curious about a lot of stuff.

[00:12:54] **Mike:** He is.

[00:12:55] **Mazza:** You would think in a perfect world that every dog that comes [00:13:00] into Paws On A Mission would make it through to be a service dog. Unfortunately, that's not the case. The standards for service dogs are high, and it's expected that not all, or even most of the dogs will graduate the program.

In this program, some of the dogs are rescues who come from shelters and have their own damage, making it even harder for the dogs to achieve the high standards for the service dogs. So when Mike told me that River was also excused from the program, I wasn't surprised.

[00:13:28] **Mike:** River was progressing well until they took him off for an evaluation in the public, and they've now decided to dismiss River from the program due to the fact he doesn't do well with strange dogs. He lunges towards him, you know, if they start to bark, he'll start to bark.

[00:13:50] **Mazza:** How do you feel about, you know, saying goodbye to this guy?

[00:13:54] **Mike:** Ah, you know, I'm gonna miss him. You know, it's, he's a good dog.

He's very, very smart. You know, [00:14:00] he's got a lot of character. You know, he's got this, he has this mischievous look in his eyes, and it doesn't help when his eyes are this out in the sun. They take on this really dark, like, mahogany color, and... just looks like he's up to no good or thinking no good, and... But at the same time, he's, he does what I ask when I ask him, you know, so, I'm gonna miss him.

[00:14:26] **Mazza:** Do you think it's fair that they're letting him go?

[00:14:31] **Mike:** Ah, you know, like, like I said earlier, it's, I understand. You know, do I think if they try, they should try out there, where they can get them access to strange dogs and see if they can't train that behavior out of him. You know, we spend a lot of time training behaviors out of dogs, you know, whether it's making a lot of noise in the crates or, you know, resource guarding or, you know, whatever it may be.

[00:15:00] We spend the time, we come up with plans to work them through that.

[00:15:05] **Mazza:** Right.

[00:15:07] **Mike:** I mean, he's gonna make somebody a, he's gonna make a good dog for somebody.

[00:15:11] **Mazza:** Yeah.

[00:15:13] **Mike:** Whether it's a family dog or with somebody who hunts.

[00:15:16] **Mazza:** What are your goals now?

[00:15:20] **Mike:** My goals with regards to the program is just to continue getting better at handling the dogs and giving them their training and giving them those things that they need. You know, to the point where at some point, maybe I'll get a dog that doesn't have any training at all.

[00:15:33] **Mazza:** Your personal journey, how do you think being in Paws has changed you?

[00:15:43] **Mike:** I feel good about it. You know, it's allowed me to have more empathy.[00:16:00]

[00:16:01] **Ivy:** And that was a story from Bryan Mazza and Mike Duran.

[00:16:05] **Mazza:** In talking to Mike several times about his involvement in the program and with the dogs he has, he puts up, I don't want to say a front. You protect yourself by trying to disassociate yourself from loving that animal, and it's hard not to, especially when you go through the process of what he went through with Robbie, and then, you know, with, with River, two really, really cool dogs. And they got excluded for minor things.

I got pictures of him with these dogs, right? And he loves them, and, and it's hard not to. it's hard not to love them. And, I, I think that... it's a being for my, in, in my, in my, in my experience, in my opinion, that animal, once you, you bond with that animal, and that animal bonds with you, that's

an association that I rank up there even higher than some relationships between [00:17:00] humans, because that love that that dog gives you is unconditional.

That devotion, that attention is unconditional. For, for anybody that's ever loved a dog, and had a dog, and, and, and lived with dogs, and seen them, and seen them operate. Understand that that is the purest form of love known to man, right there.

[00:17:22] **Ivy:** So Mazza, how did you get in this program? What did you do? How did you have to sign up for this, or how was you picked out of all these people on the yard?

[00:17:31] **Mazza:** I applied, of course. They asked us to write an essay about how we felt about dogs, and our relationship with dogs, and, and I wrote one, and it was based upon my feelings for the dogs that I've had in my life. And, they chose me. There was 50 applicants in my cohort, and I was one of eight that was chosen.

[00:17:50] **Jay:** Yeah, my question is, who's responsible for grooming these dogs?

[00:17:55] **Mazza:** The dogs get groomed every day. We, they're, in the mornings, we take them [00:18:00] out for their, their morning relief. We take them for their first walk of the day, which is like a half an hour out on the track. Bring them back in, feed them, crate them for a little while for their alone time, then bring them back out.

They go through the structural training, most of them. We affix them with a long line, and we go through certain obedience sequences and, and whatnot with the animal. Then at noon, they get what is called a freedom walk, where they're put on the long line again and, you know, a dog's senses are, they, they live through their noses.

Their freedom walk is spent out on the field. Where they just get to do their own thing, and there's no commands, there's no rewards, there's no reprimands or anything like that. The dog gets to spend time smelling the grass. And then, when we come back in, they get groomed. They go through body handling and groomed every day.

Ears, we, I'm brushing the dog's teeth every day.

Dogs are, they, they're, they're known for their empathetic [00:19:00] connection to people, and they can sense a vibe coming off a person a mile away. You can tell, when they see somebody, and they don't like them, they get real still, and they'll look, and they'll go, ugh, and they'll, they'll kind of shrink back away from them, and it happens a lot.

You got a lot of weirdos out there, bruh.

[00:19:16] **Ivy:** People think that dogs is supposed to be like, guard dogs, you know, you know, sick them on people, being tough dogs, or whatever.

[00:19:25] **b.f.:** Like protectors.

[00:19:27] **Ivy:** Not even really protectors. They, yeah. You know, they think that this dog is.

[00:19:31] **b.f.:** Weapon, they wanna weaponize it.

[00:19:33] **Ivy:** Oh, weaponizing it.

Right? So you gotta think I'm, I got a little chihuahua, I'm walking around with a chihuahua on the yard.

[00:19:39] **b.f.:** Fit your personality.

[00:19:40] **Jay:** Wawa.

[00:19:41] **Ivy:** Come on, calm down with that.

[00:19:42] **b.f.:** What?

[00:19:43] **Ivy:** So.

[00:19:43] **b.f.:** I was asking, I was asking.

[00:19:45] **Jay:** Personality like a chihuahua?

[00:19:47] **Ivy:** I don't know what this guy's talking about.

[00:19:48] **Mazza:** Hey, I know some ferocious chihuahuas. You want none of that homie, right?

[00:19:51] **b.f.:** Don't give them that.

[00:19:52] **Mazza:** I'm telling you.

[00:19:53] **Ivy:** So we had, I had this dog. I'm walking with this little Chihuahua.

[00:19:57] **Jay:** Did he have a tight t-shirt?

[00:19:58] **Ivy:** His name was Trooper. [00:20:00] As I'm walking around this yard, I have people trying to stomp at my dog, like trying to scare the dog.

[00:20:06] **b.f.:** Are you being serious?

[00:20:06] **Ivy:** I'm serious, man.

[00:20:07] **b.f.:** That's crazy.

[00:20:09] **Ivy:** So, now it's putting me, you know, in a bind, cause I'm, now I gotta, I'm the protector of this dog, man.

[00:20:14] **b.f.:** Right, right.

[00:20:14] **Ivy:** I don't wanna have my dog scared. I gotta go, I gotta train this dog for people on the, on the streets. Kids, you know, older people, just people in general. So now I have to actually get at these dudes and tell these dudes, Hey man, don't do that to my dog.

This is like a representative of me. You know what I'm sayin. So, yeah, it was a cold situation, man.

[00:20:33] **Mazza:** You have people that are, that are considerate, and they're sensitive to the, the situation that we're in as, as dog handlers and trainers. And they'll ask you, hey, can I pet your dog? There's a process of greeting that we put the dog through.

We put the dog in a sit, the dog remains calm, and then once the person adopts the proper position where they get down low, then we initiate the greeting where the dog will come up and they'll be able to stroke his [00:21:00] side or whatever and make contact with the dog. That's part of the service of what they're supposed to do as a service dog, is to be there as comfort.

I understand how that must be, to be in a prison for a long time and not have contact with an animal and then have that opportunity to actually pet an animal. It means something.

[00:21:16] **b.f.:** It's sort of a luxury.

[00:21:18] **Mazza:** It's sure, it's a luxury, and it's also, it's medicinal, it's also therapeutic.

[00:21:24] **Ivy:** So, if you had a pet in prison, how do you think your life would be?

[00:21:27] **b.f.:** I mean, come on, man, my life would be enriched. That's just another point of enrichment. You know, especially when there's people that I don't want to talk to, I'll talk to the dog.

[00:21:39] **Ivy:** Right.

[00:21:39] **b.f.:** You know, hang out with the dog. Let the dog watch me play video games on the tablet.

[00:21:44] **Ivy:** Watch movies with the dog.

[00:21:45] **Mazza:** Watch movies with the dog. All that. So what about you guys?

[00:21:49] **Ivy:** Well, I had a chance to have the dog. It was cool. The only thing I, that was, I had, the only thing that I went through about having a dog, my wife became jealous of the [00:22:00] dog.

[00:22:00] **b.f.:** What the?

[00:22:04] **Ivy:** So she said, every time I'm on the phone with her, I'm always saying, Sit Troop! Stay Troop! And she didn't like that. She said, Pay attention to me. You always talking about Troop.

[00:22:15] **b.f.:** You serious?

[00:22:16] **Ivy:** I'm serious.

[00:22:17] **b.f.:** Oh, my God. I ain't got nothing to say, bro. Bryan, does this count for you?

[00:22:24] **Mazza:** Oh. Well, that's a good question.

[00:22:27] **Ivy:** What would life be without Bella?

[00:22:30] **Mazza:** Well, without Bella or Maverick...

[00:22:34] **b.f.:** Or the program.

[00:22:34] **Mazza:** Or the program itself, I'd get a lot more rest. You know, I do this job here with Uncuffed, and then after I leave, I have Bella from 2:30 to 8:30 at night. You know, it's a labor of love. I wouldn't do it unless I, you know, if I didn't care about it, I wouldn't do it.

If I, you know, this same thing goes with Uncuffed. I love this job. So it's like... [00:23:00] It changed my life in a way where, you know, I feel very rewarded by it. And I feel as if with the responsibilities I have now, on top of college and, you know, the facilitation that I do with other programs peripheral to this. These two jobs that I have, it prepares me for working out there.

I feel as if it's preparing me for life out there. It's making me a responsible person. I'm responsible, and I'm active. You know I've gone through... you know, a process of humility. I've been in several programs, and I've humbled myself a lot in my life. I remember a lot of, a lot of my problems stemmed from wanting to serve myself.

I was my own god. My personality changed. Being of service in this program has allowed me to step outside of that realm of thinking and... For that, it has changed the way I view life. [00:24:00] Life is not about me. Life is about what I can do for somebody else. So, this whole process, being in Paws On A Mission, has just, been, a part of, my service to others.

And that's how it's changed me.

[00:24:15] **Ivy:** Well, I would like to say thank you, Mazza, for, you know, putting this good story out. You always put out good work anyway, but, I liked this story a lot, you know, because I went to a similar program, and, I just thank all y'all for this roundtable.

[00:24:29] **Mazza:** Thank you, Ivy.

[00:24:31] **Ivy:** And we're gonna wrap this thing up, man. Uncuffed out of here. To the next time.

[00:24:35] **Mazza:** Good looking, Ivy. Thank you.

[00:24:38] **Ivy:** You can find Uncuffed on the radio at KALW 91. 7 FM, at weareuncuffed dot org, and you can subscribe to Uncuffed in any podcast player. Thanks to the team at KALW Public

Radio: Ninna Gaensler-Debs, Angela Johnston, Sonia Paul, Kathy Novak, James Rowlands, Ben Trefny, Eli [00:25:00] Wirtschafter, and our sound designer, Eric "Maserati-E" Abercrombie. Our theme music is by David Jassy. Thanks to the staff at Solano who make this possible, especially Lt. Guerrero who approved this episode. We fact checked everything to the best of our ability. Uncuffed gets support from the California Arts Council and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

I'm Anthony Ivy, thanks for listening.