

You Deserve a Break Today

A shelter pairs staff and dogs for extra attention, treats, and time outside the kennel

BY JIM BAKER



Animal caregiver Jessie Wermager enjoys a little mealtime companionship with shelter resident Frankie, a 6-year-old Pekingese-Pomeranian mix. Frankie is one of many dogs who've gone through the shelter's Out to Lunch program; he was adopted shortly after this photo was taken in December.

Snowball had some issues.

A female, black-and-white pit bull mix, Snowball had been "adopted out twice, and she was very, very mouthy," says Kathie Jaster, canine behavior specialist and humane officer at Washington Humane Society in Slinger, Wisc. "She ended up [in the second home] jumping up on someone's bed, and growling at them. Each time she came back to us, she came with a little more baggage."

Snowball's behavior problems—and her revolving-door appearances—made her a perfect candidate for the shelter's Out to Lunch program for adoptable dogs, which started in spring 2010.

Jaster got the idea for the program when she noticed that whenever she had a shelter dog in her office for a little socialization time, the dog would typically wander down the hallway to the staff break room, where people were eating lunch. The dogs liked hanging out there, and staff enjoyed spending time with them beyond cleaning their kennels.

"I thought, 'Well, gee, this is easy. Why don't we do this with all of our dogs?'"

The program's a snap to run. Staff members are assigned to work in different areas of the shelter each week; whoever is scheduled to clean the kennels on the adoption floor is paired up with a dog who has been at the shelter for a long time or has some behavioral issues.

The staff member and the selected dog become lunch buddies for the week. "I take about five minutes before I sit down to eat to let the dog go to the bathroom outside, so that he or she is able to spend time with us without having to worry about any potty accidents," says Chrissie Perkins, an animal caregiver. "Then I bring the dog back in, and we let them roam, and we see how they react in that environment."

Dogs stay with their lunch buddy for half an hour, and they can explore, nap on a dog bed, perform a "sit" for treats, or go with staff to an outdoor courtyard for playtime.

The dogs enjoy the freedom of being out of their kennels and off leash, getting extra attention from staff and whoever's in the office that day, even getting to meet staff members' pets who are visiting. "They absolutely love it—their tails are wagging the whole time," Perkins says.

The two-legged lunch buddies enjoy the program, too.

"It just gives you that break from the mundane, 'I'm only with the animals because I'm cleaning or trying to get them adopted.' It gives us the opportunity to really get to know the animals, so when we are trying to get somebody to adopt them, we can give them that much more information," Perkins adds.

The lunch breaks also give staff added insight into the behavior of the dogs: who's a jumper, who's a beggar at the table, who's an unrelenting counter surfer. Then staff can work with the animals, offering treats for positive behavior, such as sitting calmly while people are eating. Meanwhile, the dogs—some of whom are stressed out from months spent at the shelter—get some time in a real-life environment.

Marnie Brown, the shelter's executive director, thinks the program improves the chances that dogs will get adopted. "The more we know about them, the easier it is to place them in the right homes," she says.

It worked for Snowball.

"She thought it was OK to jump and play and try to tug things out of your hand. She also wanted to jump up onto the table while we were eating lunch," Perkins says. Staff taught her that she wouldn't get any treats unless she was calm, sat, and waited patiently. She also learned not to grab at dangling objects, such as a scarf or the keys in a person's hand. The program "gave her that extra half hour of training every day," Perkins says.

For Snowball, the third time was the charm—she got adopted again, and the staff has heard back from her new family that all is well. 