



Waiki

A Second Chance for a *Better Life*

By Steve DiTullio

Waiki and I came into each other's lives last summer as a result of dysfunction in the home where he lived. The dog became a victim of a bad domestic situation and the family had to seek outside help for him. Lisa, a family member, contacted me asking for help in getting the dog out of the house so it could be kenneled until his owners were well enough to care for him. Lisa said she was afraid of Waiki, mostly due to his size and looks. When I met him, at first glance I could see why. He was 135 pounds of solid muscle and stood 30 inches at the shoulder. Waiki is black, with cropped ears on his giant head. Waiki was a very sinister-looking Cane Corso. Because of his all-black face and dark eyes, he was hard to read.

I was greeted with a growl as Lisa held the leash in a fearful state, telling the dog "it's okay," in a soothing tone. I told her to just start walking the dog without saying another word to him. As I walked along with them, Lisa was afraid of everything and asked me various questions related to Waiki's behavior; "What if he drags me? What if he goes after you?" I told her, again, to stop talking to the dog -- Especially in a soft and rewarding tone, reassuring him it was okay. I asked her to look at me and relax, and to tell me how her day went, while we walked along together.

It only took about 50 feet for the dog to settle into the walk. I asked Lisa to calmly

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hand me the leash and she, again, started to panic. I tried, again. I instructed her to calmly, quietly, pass me the leash. It only took Waiki a few seconds to notice that I was now holding the leash, and with confidence. We all walked another 50 feet when I asked Lisa to stop and let Waiki and I proceed on alone. She went back to the house and waited for our return. Waiki looked back for her but I continued to move forward without saying a word, and he followed me with some mild uncertainty. I stopped at the end of the block in the grass and allowed him to relieve himself. It was easy to see that he was becoming more comfortable with my presence. I offered him a small treat, which he took gently from my hand. Things went very well for our first encounter.

We took him to a local veterinary clinic/kennel where he would be boarded for approximately ten days while his owners adjusted their life. During his stay, I made it a point to visit him every other day to walk him and work with him, attempting to establish a relationship of trust. Our first three interactions proved to be challenging, our meetings starting with a low growl behind the kennel gate. In my mind, this was going to be our most important interaction and I had to show a positive and confident demeanor that would let him accept me as a guide, not a threat. It only took me a few seconds to realize his aggression was all fear-based. He continued growling and I gave him my back while slowly approaching the kennel, crouched, using a technique that I have found success in the past. I used treats of high value and actually started crunching a bag and mimicked eating them. In no time, his attitude changed, he stopped growling and started sniffing my cache, allowing me to move in closer. I offered him some tasty treats he previously would not actually take from me (an indication of a high level of stress). Making eye contact while never uttering a word, I slowly started standing up, giving him the side of my body, and he began to accept me as a person who was non-confrontational. It took a total of about 5 to 7 minutes for him to relax enough to take the treat from my extended hand and for me to open the gate in an attempt to loop a leash around him. Once I did, he displayed anxiety and started pulling on the leash in confusion. It suddenly occurred to me this was a dog whose normal weight could easily reach 150



lbs. Weighing only 135 lbs., he was very lean. A mistake in handling him could be very unforgiving on my behalf, should he act out on his insecurities in an aggressive manner. It was important to stand my ground, holding the leash securely while maintaining calmness. Every time he would settle down, I would start to move. We went through this sequence several times. It took several minutes for Waiki to move along with me in a civil manner.

The next two meetings were very similar to the first, but his growling and antics lasted for shorter periods of time. During our walks I would ask him to stop and sit, letting me pet him and talk to him in a relaxed tone. We were building a good foundation of trust between each other.

Our following meeting, Waiki came to accept me very easily and even showed minimal excitement that I was there to "break him out of jail." In this next sequence of training, I enlisted the help of some dog-savvy friends, George and Anthony, to come and meet us out on our walks. In doing so, I could evaluate how he would interact with people, acting as his guide and showing him the way. Anthony, who owns two Cane Corsos, was even able to take the leash and walk him briefly. Waiki's positive change in attitude was even being noticed by the staff at the veterinary clinic. Waiki was still a bit unsure, being in a strange new place and not in his home with familiar people. This was noted when Waiki was happy to see members of the family, Lisa's son and daughter, whom he knew but did not live with.

At the end of Waiki's two-week stay, his owner was set to pick him up, and I asked that the staff observe the dog's reaction when he arrived. It was good to hear that Waiki was happy to see them, giving me some peace of mind, and I was in hopes that they now saw the responsibility and commitment a dog needs to be successful in a home -- Especially a magnificent animal like Waiki. I left them my contact information, offering any assistance they might need, and reiterated the importance of being committed to this dog.

Fast forward 6 months... Lisa calls requesting help. The family members caring for Waiki would no longer be in their home and they could not keep or care for the dog. Lisa had three dogs at home and was not able to take him. If I couldn't help, Waiki would be going to the *Animal Control Center (ACC)*, where he would inevitably end up a candidate for euthanasia due to his misunderstood aggressive behavior. ACC does not usually have the resources to rehabilitate bad behavior.

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I was very angered at the irresponsibility and willingness of people, in general, to just discard the very animals who have come to trust and rely upon their "family" for their basic needs -- Especially in this case where I had extended the offer to help in hopes of avoiding a situation like this, again.

In the weeks to come, I took on the commitment of seeking a "forever home" for Waiki. I met up with Lisa at his home and immediately noted that she was, again, exhibiting fear and anxiety about handling the dog. I could also see the obvious stress she was under. Her energy was not conducive to what we were about to accomplish -- Reconnecting with Waiki after 6 months had lapsed.

In obvious tension, Lisa emerged from the house with Waiki in tow, growling at me while Lisa used a soothing tone of voice telling him "*it's all right,*" and what a good boy he was. We were back to square one, and I again had to ask her to keep quiet, explaining that her behavior and voice intonation could put me in jeopardy of being bitten. Waiki began to settle down as we continued to walk. I took the leash from Lisa and she retreated into the house. I made Waiki "heel," and we pushed forward at a brisk pace. It was a frigid evening in December, and we were out for 20 minutes. He cooperated the whole way. I felt that we were rapidly gaining back some of the ground that had been lost.

From this point forward, Waiki would be alone in the house. A neighbor would feed him and let him out in the yard. I would visit almost every day to interact with him and take him out on walks for the next week. I used these interactions as an evaluation of his reactions to people, places and things to help figure out what type of home would best suit him. These interactions were creating a bond of trust between us that allowed me to keep moving him forward in a positive direction.

I discovered that Waiki had great potential and began the search for a proper home to suit him. I took photos and wrote a short bio, and posted on some Internet pet sites. I continued to take him out daily for walks to wooded areas to entice his sense of smell – a good technique to exercise a dog's mind while also physically exercising the body. Clearly, this was a new experience for him. He used his snout, scruffing along the ground to take it all in without lifting his head the whole time. I actually thought he would crash into a tree and I had many laughs over the way he was reacting to the new "ground."

I continued to expose Waiki to any and all environmental stimulations as a way to

understand him, but he always had an uncertainty when encountering new people around him. This was a behavior I had to keep a close eye on and continue working on. I needed him to trust me during social interactions and showed him that I would make the decisions for him, taking care of any situations that arose and not letting anything bad happen to him.

I began the search for a potential adopter. I found a guy that was interested in him and he told me he had experience with large, powerful breeds of dog. I explained to him that this dog had some issues and could have other issues I have not even observed yet, but ultimately he was interested in meeting the dog. I had him meet



me and Lisa at Waiki's home. Lisa still acted in a fearful state around the dog. I assured her that Waiki and I were starting to develop a relationship. When we came out with the dog, the potential adopter, Bill, was in his car where I asked him to stay while I took Waiki for a walk. I could already see that he was intimidated by the size and the look of the dog. When I returned, I asked Bill to come out of the car. I took Lisa and Waiki towards him and calmly talked to Bill and told him to relax. I could see his fear. He was standing there stiff and scared. The dog could sense it, too. I asked him to look at me, not the dog, and talk to me calmly about his drive over here. As we got closer, the dog growled at him. I touched Waiki

and said "quiet" in a firm tone. I asked everyone to stand around relaxed and as I started a casual conversation, Waiki did something I never witnessed before. He tried to mount me! He is so big that his paws were on the back of my shoulder. I commanded him off and moved sideways. He got off me immediately. Lisa got scared and excited and started praising him, "good boy." I asked her to stop talking to him because she could be putting us in jeopardy of getting bit.

Waiki then jumped on her. I corrected him off of her then he jumped on Bill. I calmly corrected him with an "off" command. Everyone was on edge. I told them if they couldn't keep their cool, they needed to walk away. I put Waiki in a "sit, stay." I explained to them that the dog was just testing us. He was trying to see where

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he could fit in to the “pack” and at what level of hierarchy that he could possibly achieve. I put him into a “down, stay” to show him what I thought of the whole episode. He understood and laid down calmly with no protest. I gave him a treat and calmly praised him. To me, this was a great opportunity to continue to show the dog that I was the decision maker -- And he was OK with it.

I did several more interactions with Bill. At his home and for rides in Bill’s car. Waiki showed me his fear of entering new places, especially around stairs. At Bill’s house the first time, he would walk up to the porch and just stayed at the front door. There were five stairs that went up from the door and five that went down. I got him to the threshold of the door where I waited for him to sit and relax. He finally laid down there. Now he could look inside the house with the door open and examine everything. I started to notice Bill was uncomfortable around the dog. So we just hung out there and talked. I ended the session there.

On our next visit to Bill’s house, I had a plan to take the dog up the stairs. I used some food to get him back on the porch like I did the first time and waited for him to settle down. Remember, this is a big dog that at times is unsure of new environments. I got him used to me rubbing him with a towel on his belly and on his chest. I then rolled the towels up so I could use them as slings. I put one by his chest and one by his stomach while I fed him a few treats and praised him. I told Bill to take the sling in the back and I took the one in the front. Bill was afraid that the dog might get upset and act out. I told him not to worry and follow my lead. If Waiki gets upset, I was the one near his head. On the count of three, we lifted him

up just enough to get his feet off the ground and move him gently right up the stairs. It worked perfectly. Before he knew it, he was in the house. There were several other people in the house. I asked everyone to ignore the dog and act naturally so the dog could investigate the new surroundings. Within a few minutes of sniffing, Waiki came to me calmly. I asked him to sit, offered him a treat and praised him. I waited a few more minutes, then one by one I had each person



in the house come over and greet him, offer him a small treat and some easy patting with praise. I still sensed Bill's lack of enthusiasm, but this was a substantial breakthrough in my mind. I was sure that a bond of trust was truly starting to develop between Waki and I. I could see him starting to relax, and he even laid down and rolled over giving me his belly. I showed Waiki how happy I was by rubbing and scratching him while praising in a soft tone.



Two days later, we did the same sequence at Bill's house, but by this time I could sling him and move him along easily myself. I took him to my home and practiced moving him with the sling into my house and up and down the stairs of my basement. After several repetitions, he was doing it almost on his own. I would put one finger on his collar and calmly encourage him to follow me. It was beautiful because the foundation of our relationship and trust was being formed, and I continued working the program with him. He was starting to look at me for direction and security. Bill and I came to an agreement for him to take the dog on a trial basis on Friday, so if things went well we would have free time on the weekend to continue moving Waiki along. Friday came and I never heard from Bill after he got off work. He did not return my two phone calls or my text (this was a big red flag). What I thought I saw in Bill's lack of enthusiasm now was apparent. I did not want to take the dog back to the empty house where he was living so I convinced my wife to bring Waiki into our home where I would start a restructuring program with him. I had Lisa fill out a surrender form so I would now be responsible for the dog. The first day I kept him separated from my dog, Sato, a 150lb. Japanese Mastiff that was recovering from knee surgery.

I exercised Waiki extensively, a program I would use on him for the next three weeks. I taught him to walk at my side and then I upped the ante and showed him how to follow alongside of me while I rode the bicycle. This came easy to him. Then we would go to the park in the afternoon for a walk in the woods where he could do some exploring with his nose and then we would take a long walk at night.

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That first night, Waiki showed us how bad his separation anxiety really was. He howled, barked, cried and pawed at the gate I had set up. He carried on like a big baby. I was sleeping on the living room floor, only fifteen feet away from him - and my dog was only ten feet away from him - so he could still see, hear and smell us. I was only able to sleep for two hours that night.



The next few nights, he carried on but for less time. He was no longer housebroken from being left alone in the owner's house for long periods of time unattended. He needed to be restructured and put on a schedule. It took about four days before he stopped soiling in my basement. He wanted to fight with my dog, Sato, so I would do different types of controlled and supervised interactions. If these two beasts mixed it up, it could be a dangerous task trying to separate them. It would also affect my position as the guide and decision-maker in Waiki's mind, and things were moving along much too well to jeopardize that position for me. We all stayed with the program consistently. I could see very quickly that

Waiki accepted women easier than men. By the third or fourth day, he would soften up when my wife would greet him in the mornings, and he would even go grab a toy to greet her with as a gift. I started asking Lisa more about his history at his previous home and found out why he acted that way with women and why his separation anxiety was so great. He was allowed to sleep in the bed of the woman in the house. She was the soft nurturing type and was with him all the time, while her son who lived in the same house was the opposite. He was the disciplinarian and when the dog would not comply, he would use abusive tactics. He had hurt the dog several times, once sending him to the vet clinic to get his foot stitched from a glass object that was thrown at the dog.

Waiki did have a foundation in obedience, so at some point time was put into him before the owners lost their way and the dog was not a priority to them anymore. When I would discipline Waiki for acting out with an unwanted behavior, he would look at me with the expectation of physical punishment to follow (*Oh no, I am going to get hit now*). I could see it in his posture, face and eyes. It took about three weeks for him to realize that in his new environment that was not how problem-

solving was done. This also would help him accept me as a direct and fair guide that he could trust and was happy to follow. I continued working with him by using the exercise program first, then doing obedience sessions. I would show him that his life depends on me. I continued interactions with new people and desensitizing him to my dog, Sato.

I set up a gate that separated two rooms. I put chairs next to the gate so there was a few feet of distance between the two dogs. Now they could hear, see and smell each other while I monitored and redirected any unwanted behavior as they settled down. I started asking for "sits" and "downs" while feeding them treats. I worked on interactions in the yard by tying Waiki out and leashing Sato to me. I would get them closer and closer, all while doing obedience and rewarding them. They would "posture and position" with each other only a few times, and I was able to stop these behaviors with verbal reprimand. I could see that Waiki was respecting what I was asking for without much of a fight.

People could now offer treats and ask for a "sit" and Waiki would comply. He was learning that I have a lot of friends and so does he. He met about a hundred people and twenty-five dogs. Sato and Waiki were soon playing together. Sato would teach him how to interact, play bow and be a dog among dogs, and a follower to a fair human guide. There was harmony in my home with these two extra-large power breeds. I decided to commit to keeping this magnificent Cane Corso, if the right owner could not be found. Waiki's new family would have to meet high standards and be experienced enough due to the severity of this dog's behavior. If guidance with consistency was not part of his life, he could be a tremendous liability.

We grew very attached to this dog. I would take both dogs everywhere I could. When I would walk on the street or in the parks with Sato on the left and Waiki on the right, people would move out of the way and comment on the two well-behaved



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"monsters" they saw. In the mean time, I had him vetted and the doctor and staff could not believe that this was the same dog that they had previously met. They marveled at how he accepted new people comfortably and that I took him up and down the stairs easily (before he would not even attempt them). He made me feel proud and he was a great example of a restructured dog.

I began receiving feedback from the postings I had made on the internet. A great majority I didn't even consider, but soon received one that I felt could be a potential fit. We set up an appointment for them to meet Waiki. I asked Jim, the potential adopter, if all the family members that would be part of the dog's life would come along for an interaction, including their ten-pound female Pomeranian. They were all impressed with Waiki's looks, his obedience and good-natured personality. They had an eight-year-old son and he was the first one I showed how to walk the dog.

I liked Jim and all the family members. They had recently lost an aging Rottweiler. They had also owned other large-breed dogs in the past, and I felt this family had experience, compassion and a quality home to offer Waiki. We did three more interactions at their home which was a very nice place with a good-sized yard. With each meeting, Waiki would settle in with the family and the Pomeranian was starting to accept this big dog. Every time we got together, we all felt positive about Waiki's future. I explained to Jim that he is not the "perfect dog," and still had some issues that needed attention. We went over his commands and I showed the family how to handle him. I explained that with positive leadership and guidance, he would adjust just fine.

I had Jim prepare his home for an extended visit. I left him with the dog for the day, and all went well. The following time, I left Waiki at Jim's over night and then for a weekend stay. I knew that his time in my home was coming to an end. These extended visits allowed the family to see if this was the right dog for them. And it turned out that Jim and his family were positive that they wanted him. This was a bittersweet time. I was sure Waiki was going to the right home, but letting him go was tough, as he became part of my pack and my very own family.



Just two months prior, he was confused, scary-

looking and a potential time-bomb that tested my guidance and position as the leader. But he proved to be just another dog that was able to transform into a social, confident and happy follower when given the right information. He had a new four-legged best friend named Sato, thanks to perseverance with a consistent program, with a human showing him clearly how good life can be.

Today, we continue to make visits and spend time with Waiki and his new family. Jim's son owns a young, male Rottweiler and a female Pit Bull. His daughter owns dogs that also befriended Waiki. With this extended family, it should help strengthen and maintain his social skills and stability. We miss this big beast, but it's great when he and Sato get to see each other for some fun doggie play. A big thanks to Jim and his whole family for welcoming Waiki into their home and hearts, and also for allowing Sato and I to have an incredible extended family. U

*Steve DiTullio grew up in a family of animal lovers, especially dogs. He always had 1 to 3 dogs in his family. They were great pets but never trained well. Due to their misunderstanding of what it actually takes to fulfill a dog's needs, he became involved in training around 1992 with a great dog he had. That dog and the first trainer who trained them started his real understanding of what a dog needs (Structure, Guidance and Alliance). As he has been training and observing behaviors over the years, he met many people and their dogs. It motivates him to help both human and animal to understand each other. It is important to understand individual personalities of dogs and to be resourceful in managing unwanted behaviors and rewarding the good behaviors. The guide must always maintain a relaxed but direct demeanor to accomplish communication. Visit him online: **www.forpawzdog-training.com or www.steveddograining.com***

