

Final Story
Eyes Ears Nose and Paws

Eyes Ears Nose and Paws, a Chapel Hill/Carrboro nonprofit, pairs puppies with prisoners to develop a growing network of service animals while inspiring confidence and compassion among the inmates.

Eyes Ears Nose and Paws, or EENP, is an organization devoted to training service dogs and partnering them with people in need. EENP works to place two types of assistance dogs: mobility service and medical alert dogs.

However, the staff and volunteers at EENP cannot do this work alone.

Because it takes thousands of hours to train a service animal, EENP works alongside many North Carolina prisons and institutions. They do this through the introduction of the At Both Ends of the Leash, or ABEL, program within their inmate population.

The ABEL program is an 18-month commitment for the inmate-trainers in hopes of promoting morale and rehabilitation within their lives. Throughout the program, inmates teach the animals specialized skills, such as detecting spikes or drops in blood sugar and alerting for possible seizures.

According to the EENP website, “This is a triple win: our dogs get full-time attention, training, and love; the inmate-trainers develop interpersonal, leadership, and job skills while giving back to the community despite their incarceration; and our clients receive life-changing support for their disabilities in the form of a highly-trained canine partner.”

Before puppies are eligible to enter the ABEL program, they must learn basic socialization and training skills. In order to complete this process, EENP places the puppies in homes with community volunteers, called Young Puppy Trainers.

One such Young Puppy Trainer is Laura Quinn. As a YPT, Laura houses, trains and socializes potential service puppies in the early months of their lives. YPTs are also responsible for house-breaking and bringing the puppies to weekly training sessions at EENP.

The puppy that Quinn trained is named Mr. Lynn. Mr. Lynn is named after an ardent supporter of EENP, Lynn Ikenberry, who housed some of the first service puppies that passed the ABEL program.

“I am doing this because I know that he is going to help someone so much in the future, and seeing the positive impact that he will have on someone’s life would be the most rewarding thing for me,” Quinn said.

When puppies finish their basic training, typically around 5-8 months old, they are ready to enter the prison and begin the ABEL program. At this time, puppies gain an inmate-trainer, as well as a Furlough trainer, who will house and care for them when they are on rotation out of the prison.

Furlough trainers are meant to bridge the gap between the prison and the outside world. Puppies go on “furlough” one week out of every month, allowing them to experience settings that are not available within the confines of the prisons.

Hannah Blake-Harris, who served as a YPT for three different EENP puppies, recently became a Furlough trainer. She is currently working with a group of golden retrievers that have been in the ABEL program for about two months — Mr. Lynn, Margot and Dublin.

“I think that this is one of the best things that the prisoners could do,” Blake-Harris said. “One ABEL trainer told me that it has given him a whole new outlook on life. He said it felt like he was positively impacting society again.”

On both the EENP website and YouTube channel, inside looks at the prisons that use the ABEL program are available. Inmates are shown working with puppies as well as interviewed about their own experiences.

In one of these interviews, an anonymous ABEL trainer stated, “I thought it was all about training dogs...I never thought it would be 85% dealing with myself, and the other 15% training the dogs.”

After the dogs have completed the ABEL program, a graduation ceremony is held. This ceremony recognizes the dedication of everyone that contributed to the life and training of the

new service animal. At the leash ceremony, the Young Puppy Trainers and ABEL inmate-trainers are able to express how working with that animal and EENP has impacted them.

During this ceremony, new puppies are welcomed into the ABEL program, while graduating puppies are changed from red leashes to blue leashes, signifying the skills that they have mastered throughout.

The Eyes Ears Nose and Paws' ABEL program allows inmates to gain a new sense of their lives.

The goals of the program state the intent to change the self-image of inmates from "I hurt people" to "I help people". Through this process, they learn the skills and confidence they need for re-entering society.

The At Both Ends of the Leash program aims to provide a positive voice and impact to the inmate-trainers, while also providing life-altering support, in the form of service animals, to those in need. Devoting their work in hopes of living up to their original mission statement.

"Partnering people with dogs to improve lives."