



## Full Circle: Prison Inmates Train a Courthouse Dog

By Ellen O'Neill-Stephens JD

Courthouse dogs are for everybody: victims and their families, witnesses, defendants in mental health, veteran and drug courts, jurors, and courthouse staff. They give us a common bond with one another and their soothing presence often make it easier for us to participate in stressful criminal justice proceedings. But now this concept has gone beyond that. This is a story of how prison inmates help victims from inside prison walls.

In the summer of 2009, Celeste and I met Sister Pauline Quinn, who started the first prison service dog training program by teaching inmates at the Washington Corrections Center for Women how to help others while healing themselves. After we toured this facility with her it occurred to me that if inmates trained a courthouse dog, things would have come full circle.

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Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Judi Johnson in Boone County, Indiana, wanted a courthouse dog. During her long career as a prosecutor she had always thought that children going through the system had been given short shrift. She first heard of courthouse dogs at our National District Attorney Association conference presentation in 2008 and months later she came to visit us in Seattle to learn more about how these dogs assist children during interviews and trials. Although she felt challenged by the obstacles she would have to overcome to make her dream a reality, we told her that if she had passion and determination she could make it happen.

In 2009 we again heard from Judi because she thought the time was ripe to obtain a courthouse dog for their special assault unit. We introduced Sally Irvin, Clinical Psychologist and Founder of the Indiana Canine Assistant Network ([www.icandog.org](http://www.icandog.org)), to Judi hoping that ICAN could provide the right dog for Judi's work. At that time we knew that her organization was a member of Assistance Dogs International, but we didn't realize that the service dogs she provides are raised and trained for two years by inmates in Indiana's prisons. Neither did Judi... until her application for a facility dog was approved and she was invited to meet her dog Mya and participate in two weeks of training with her.

While making the final arrangements, Sally casually mentioned to Judi that her training would take place at the Indiana Women’s Prison, a maximum security facility where the inmates would teach her how to work with Mya. She also explained that most of the dog trainers had convictions for murder. Judi was somewhat stunned to receive this news. Once she recovered, her first thought was to find out if she had prosecuted any of them. If that were the case, she thought this would be extremely uncomfortable for her and for the inmates. Sally researched this issue and told Judi that was not a problem. Although this whole concept was almost surreal for Judi, she was determined to get a dog to help child victims so she thought she would give it a try.

Judi was nervous on the first day of team training. As she passed the razor wire along the prison walls and walked towards the entrance she had no idea what to expect. Would the inmates be hostile towards her, would she be viewed as the enemy? However her fears were unwarranted. In addition to Judi, there were several disabled young adults there that were also at the prison to meet and learn how to handle their dogs. The inmates were very professional, kind and skilled dog trainers. Within hours Judi felt engaged with everyone and respected the inmate’s competency in handling the dogs. Over the days, their respective roles as prosecutor and former defendants disappeared. One training exercise was for the service dog recipients to dance with their dogs while the inmates played disco music. (It was time to have fun because learning how to handle a service dog is very hard work; the dogs know everything and the recipients know nothing.) By this time Judi was able to let her guard down and rocked the gym floor with Mya. The inmates thought, “Hey, she’s not so bad after all, she’s a real person.”



What they didn’t know was that this was a very emotional experience for Judi. At the end of each day, Judi would sit in her car in the prison parking lot and cry. Over the course of the training period, Judi had learned that many of the inmates had been sexually abused themselves as children. She wondered at what point a sexually abused child becomes a defendant capable of committing a murder. When does a prosecutor go from being a victim’s champion to ensuring that this same person is incarcerated for life?

The world is a much easier place to navigate when the roadmap is black and white.

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When Celeste and I heard about the successful placement of a courthouse dog trained by inmates we were determined to learn more about this experience. The Seattle Police Department (SPD) Foundation provided us with a grant to film a new documentary/training film about courthouse dogs and we decided that we, along with Cesar Hidalgo-Landeros, the talented SPD videographer, must visit with Judi, Sally Irvin and the inmates from the Indiana Women’s Maximum Security Prison to document what had happened. This is what we learned.

Celeste and I spoke with the inmates during our visit. They all appreciated that they had been given the opportunity to participate in the prison dog program. They especially valued that this program allowed them to make amends for what they had done by improving the quality of life for others.

Like Judi, I found this experience to be perplexing. The lines were becoming so blurred. After twenty-five years as a deputy prosecuting attorney, I found it hard to accept that although these inmates had committed terrible crimes they were also likable, compassionate people.

One inmate shared that learning to successfully train these dogs forced her to learn how to control her emotions and actions for the first time in her life. She also added that if she had had a courthouse dog when she was sixteen and facing murder charges she would have been able to think more clearly. I asked this inmate what she would say to a defense attorney who objected to a courthouse dog accompanying an emotionally traumatized youngster into the courtroom.



She simply said that **all of us** should remember that “this is a child.”