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Give pit bulls a chance says animal-rescue advocate

By Gloria Teal
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Many former homeless animals in the New York tri-state region are now beloved pets thanks to Dori Scofield, the director of the [Brookhaven Animal Shelter and Adoption Center](#), the largest municipal animal shelter in New York. The shelter houses up to 300 animals on any given day, and Scofield works tirelessly to find them all a home — no easy task considering that most of the dogs she has up for adoption are pit bulls. Irresponsible ownership combined with the breed's bad reputation has resulted in a growing population of homeless pit bulls across the country.

I recently caught up with Scofield to find out more about pit bulls, shelters and Scofield's novel approach to get these dogs adopted by loving families.

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Some of the pit bulls up for adoption at Scofield's shelter. Pictured above, Donald.

Gloria Teal: What's the situation faced by unwanted pit bulls across the nation?

Dori Scofield: It's like an epidemic. They're everywhere especially in some areas: they're breeding them, they're not getting spayed and neutered and it's just gotten out of control. And once they get into a shelter, they're very hard to place because of breed discrimination.

Teal: A lot of people have really negative associations with pit bulls. What are some of the common misperceptions?

Scofield: We just came up with something that I think is going to be our new slogan: *breed discrimination is bull pit*. A lot of people see a pit bull and they immediately think it's vicious, it's been in a fighting ring, it's jaws lock and that it's a bad breed. First of all, their jaws don't lock; they have the same jaws as every other dog. The truth is pit bulls were the first breed to play nannies to children because they are such a loyal and protective dogs. One of the reasons people use pit bulls as fighting dogs is that when they break up a fight, pit bulls are least likely breed to direct aggression towards humans — even in the middle of a fight and that just goes to show what good dogs they are. At the end of the day, a dog is a dog. You have to judge every dog as an individual. I've had golden retrievers that were vicious. Every dog has the potential to be a good dog and every dog has the potential to be a vicious dog. It's all in the socialization and the training.

Teal: How prevalent is dog fighting?

Scofield: Dog fighting is prevalent everywhere. There's a lot of dog fighting in New York State because the laws aren't as stringent. In New Jersey, you can be arrested for just being a spectator at a dog fight, so [fight organizers] move the fights to New York where if there's a bust during a fight, spectators don't get in trouble. So the laws have to change. Why make it easy for [organizers]? Let's make it harder.

Teal: What should someone do if they suspect dog fighting is going on in their community?

Scofield: If you suspect any kind of animal abuse contact the authorities. You can call the police, your local shelter or your local SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty in Animals). Better yet, contact all three.

Teal: What are some of the programs that you're implementing in Brookhaven to help solve the problem of homeless pit bulls?

Scofield: The biggest program is the volunteer program. The more volunteers we get in, the more networking we can do for these dogs and the more homes we

can place them in. [Pit-bulls] aren't the most adoptable dogs in the shelter. If I had a shelter full of Yorkies I'd be fine, but since we're a shelter full of pit bulls it's a lot harder to get them adopted out, so we do a lot of networking.

Everybody who volunteers here is part of our pit-bull crew. We work with the dogs on basic obedience skills. We're trying to get a canine good citizen program off the ground so we can really show off these dogs in the best light possible. Our "Spay It Forward" program is going to be one of the best programs here. The first project within this program is "Project Pit Bull." We'll go out into the community and offer free spay and neutering, and anyone who comes in to get a pit bull spayed or neutered will get a certificate to give someone else so they can get their pit bull spayed or neutered. That's how we came up with the name.

We'll also offer free heart-worm tests, micro-chipping, vaccinations and collars to anyone who owns a pit bull or pit-bull mix in our township. It'll help eliminate the unwanted litters that we get and help return lost dogs to their homes. I'd also like to start offering free spay and neutering to low-income people.

Another part of the project is subsidizing food and medical expenses for people who might otherwise have to surrender their pit bull because of the cost. Getting the veterinarians involved is going to be a big part of it, but I think once we launch it it's going to be a really great program. I would love it to just grow: Always do pit bulls for free, add the low-income people and then do everyone in the entire townships.

Teal: What are some things that everyone can do whether they own a pit bull or not?

Scofield: One thing everyone can do is always keep identification on your animals. I can't tell you how many animals come in here without a collar or a microchip. And if you do have a microchip, register it to your address. I have to tell you of the animals that come in here with a microchip, one out of 50 are registered to the owner.

Teal: What should people know about shelter animals, pit-bull or otherwise?

Scofield: I really want to encourage people to adopt a pet. Dogs aren't in shelters because they're bad; a dog is in a shelter because someone was irresponsible. They don't have behavioral issues. They're just dogs who need homes.