

Pit Bulls Need Friends Too

But in the Wake of the Shawn Jones mauling, the breed has a major image problem

By Emily Wilson

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Although she begged and begged for one, Amber Niewold was not allowed to have a dog growing up. Now her West Oakland home has crates, cages, and beds to accommodate her dogs Rupert and Spiro, her roommates' dog, Sissy, and a foster dog, Pepper, along with a couple of cats. All the dogs except for Spiro, Niewold's first dog who followed her home five years ago, are pit bulls. A year or so after getting Spiro, she decided she was ready for another dog. The day she was planning to go the shelter and pick one out, she found a pit bull puppy under a dumpster by her house. The dog was emaciated, covered with bite marks and blood and had a telephone cord wrapped around his neck. "I was just going to make sure it wouldn't die and find somebody who knew about the breed," says Niewold, "because in all honesty, I was afraid of pit bulls."

BAD RAP members Donna Reynolds with dog Sally and Amber Niewold with Rupert.

Alain McLaughlin

BAD RAP members Donna Reynolds with dog Sally and Amber Niewold with Rupert.

Niewold, who interrupts herself occasionally to direct the dogs to get down, and to threaten to spray the exuberant Rupert with a water bottle, is not afraid anymore. Now, as cofounder of Bay Area Dog Owners Responsible About Pit Bulls (BAD RAP), she spends her spare time and money trying to educate people about the breed. "The problem is not with the dogs," says Niewold. "The worst owners are drawn to the breed because of their bad reputation, but it's not the dogs. Some of these people shouldn't own a goldfish. People need to understand that any dog would be dangerous if it's raised this way." Niewold compares pit bulls to her neighborhood. "West Oakland has this bad reputation, but it's really great. I have a public pool by my house, two parks nearby, a library right here, and there's a women's center a few blocks away."

Members of BAD RAP, who were all rescuing pit bulls on their own, met online last year and decided to get together to support one another and to address the problems cities face. "There is no denying there is a pit bull problem," says Niewold. That problem was thrown into a harsh media spotlight last month when a ten-year-old Richmond boy named Shawn Jones was mauled by three pit bulls as he was riding his new bike. "Those dogs who attacked Shawn Jones are dangerous and they should be put down. We want to work towards making sure what happened to Shawn will never happen again." The Jones case brought attention to the number of pit bulls running loose in Richmond, and recently the public safety committee of the City Council held a special meeting to hear the complaints and ideas of the public.

"The meeting as a whole went wonderfully," says Donna Reynolds, another member of BAD RAP. "People were very open-minded and they are interested in finding creative solutions to very real problems." Many of the suggestions proposed at the meeting are things BAD RAP supports, such as enforcing leash laws, more and better education for owners, and spaying and neutering for pets.

"Seventy-six percent of bites are from unneutered males running around loose," says Reynolds. "Since everyone wants to mate their dogs and sell the puppies, there is no incentive to spay and neuter dogs. The mayor addressed that at the meeting and I was really pleased."

"We need to find a way to make the community more safe," says Rosemary Corbin, the mayor of Richmond. Corbin says city staff members are working with the county to beef up animal care and control services and to improve the speed of response to complaints. Corbin says that along with dog obedience classes, she wants a program to subsidize spaying and neutering, and a public education campaign to let the public know they have a responsibility to report potentially dangerous dogs. Also, the mayor says the city will limit the number of dogs people can own to three instead of four in a house and two instead of three in an apartment or condo. "Everybody has come to the conclusion that you can't ban one breed. It's problem owners, not problem dogs. If you want a watchdog, get one that barks, not one that bites. No one should own a potentially dangerous dog."

Reynolds says most of the problems with pit bulls come from three things: people dumping dogs if they can't sell the whole litter, dangerous dogs breaking free of the yard, and people adopting pit bulls without really knowing what they are in for. "They are big strong dogs and you need to show them you're a good leader," says Niewold, who runs obedience classes in her house. "But they're incredible dogs -- loyal, comical, brave, and loving."

Although Stacey Jacobson is now completely sold on the good qualities of pit bulls, she says before finding herself living with roommates who owned one, she believed what she calls "the myths about pit bulls." "I found them intimidating," she says. "I thought they were mean and ferocious and were one-owner kind of dogs." Jacobson got her dog, Sailor, after seeing him on the BAD RAP Web site (badrap.org), and she says he is incredibly well mannered. Jacobson is careful to always walk Sailor on a leash and says she gets mostly positive responses from people, even after what happened to Shawn Jones. "The more interaction people have with pit bulls who are friendly and not aggressive, the more they will realize what great dogs they are," Jacobson says.

This is exactly what BAD RAP wants: owners who are responsible about their dogs, and a public that sees pit bulls as loving, friendly animals rather than demon dogs. The group, which has nine steering committee members and about forty volunteers, goes to shelters to looking for abandoned dogs. After the dogs go through a temperament evaluation, members try to find them foster homes. "We're looking for the best of the best," says Niewold. "The dogs have to be good with people, and ideally other dogs too. We make sure they're submissive and eager to please."

The group also does education for the public. They recently held a public forum at the animal shelter in Antioch, and are now putting together another one in Oakland. In light of the Jones tragedy, Niewold is also working on a training session for kids on what to do if they encounter a stray dog. "This incident has propelled us to concentrate more on education," she says. "That's our focus, but it's easy to get caught up in rescue work because that's so satisfying. Before, there wasn't a lot of public support because we work with pit bulls and people hate pit bulls, but now people seem to understand we're not trying to propagate the breed, we're just trying to educate people about dogs."

Both Niewold and Reynolds have been very pleased with the general response to their efforts -- even in Richmond. After the City Council meeting, Reverend Andre Shumack, president of the Iron Triangle Neighborhood Council, asked BAD RAP to do some workshops at the two elementary schools and the high school in the area. "I have a personal concern in this," Shumack says. "My mother is worried about taking her daily walk, and my kids ride their bikes in the same neighborhood where Shawn Jones was attacked. We're looking at what's best for the dog owner as well as the people on the street. We want this to be a win-win."