

Woof: Wide smiles and wagging tails

Kevin Fagan

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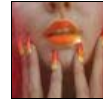
Jean Green sings a song to Chula, the dog she fostered with Eric Wightman, as she says goodbye at the Woof graduation. Photo: Sarah Rice, Special To The Chronicle / SF



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Seven weeks ago, eight nervous, formerly homeless people were getting to know four shy little dogs in a novel city program aimed at seeing if they could all get along and help each other.

Friday the verdict was in.

It was told with tears, smiles and lots of happy barks.

The participants were all "graduated" from the city's first class of Wonderful Opportunities for Occupants and Fidos (Woof) in a lunchtime ceremony - and judging by the loving way the humans held on to the critters and the critters nuzzled their humans, the program was a success.

"When you've been homeless, you feel like you have a scarlet H on your chest," graduate Eric Wightman, 46, said as he petted Chula, a 2-year-old Chihuahua mix. "But taking care of Chula - it's done as much for me as it did for her. Being in this program really shows me I

can get back there in normal society."

The goal of Woof was to train formerly homeless people on how to turn shelter dogs into placid pups ready for adoption. The program was conceived by [Bevan Dufty](#), Mayor [Ed Lee](#)'s point person on homelessness, to give supportive housing residents a way to make a little money - \$50 to \$75 a week- and feel so engaged they won't be tempted to panhandle.

Wightman helped transform Chula from an attention-starved stray into an affectionate little pooch. And Chula helped transform Wightman from a man who was too embarrassed to get help for his teeth - damaged from street heroin before he cleaned up six years ago - into next week's dental patient.

"I'm going to get my teeth done, and then I'm going to start volunteering at the city's animal shelter and hopefully someday get a job working with animals," Wightman said, beaming.

The graduation was held before 60 animal advocates and other Woof admirers in a conference room at Julian and Raye Richardson [Apartments](#) on Fulton Street, run by Community Housing Partnership. All the graduates live in housing partnership buildings.

Woof and its staff of professional trainers was funded by a \$10,000 grant, and now Dufty hopes to raise similar money to conduct a second Woof class. Meanwhile, two graduates will keep their dogs, and the other two pooches will be adopted out from the city animal shelter.

The idea initially drew scorn from some including one animal rights group, but on Friday Animal Care and Control Director [Rebecca Katz](#), the county's interim sheriff and others said any fears of trouble for the dogs were unfounded.

"Just look at these individuals and these dogs today - each one, you can see how this program changed them," said Dufty, who was master of ceremonies at the graduation.

"We'd really love to expand this program," said Katz. "We think it could benefit a lot of people."

Kevin Fagan is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: kfagan@chronicle.com

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raferzorin 10:22 PM on September 21, 2012

Godspeed Woof..crossing my fingers and saying a prayer. As a dog lover, I really hope this works.

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