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FACES AND PLACES

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Training needed for dogs and humans

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NORTHFIELD – Twenty-three-year-old Kelly Sullivan knows that though the two species are the best of friends, men come from Mars and dogs come from Pluto.

An expert on animal behavior, and a specialist in the relationship between man and dog, Sullivan launched her own business, Doggonit Training, earlier this year. Her bachelor's degree, with a focus on animal cognition, and including "a lot of human psychology," is well-suited to her line of work.

"Being an animal behaviorist, you're working with people more than dogs," she said.

Sullivan said that many canine behavior problems stem from the animal's owner, who may not be properly asserting himself or herself as the "pack leader." Living in the plush world of humans, where toys are readily available, where food is free for the taking, and where affection is given for no apparent reason, can be confusing to dogs, she added.

"Any dog that controls resources is the pack leader," Sullivan said.

Taking back your evolutionary role is accomplished through "simple stuff," she said, such as entering a door before your pet, making him "work" for his food, and giving him toys when you decide that it's play time.

"A lot of people think it's negative, or mean, but they're pack animals," Sullivan said, noting that 80 percent of dogs do not even have the desire to be pack leader.

Also important for dog owners is maintaining a leader's demeanor—calm and assertive, according to Sullivan.

"They totally feel your energy," she said, recounting one consultation in which a previously-ornery pit bull fell asleep at her feet within 10 minutes of her arrival.

Sullivan's ability to project confident energy may be related to the fact that when she's helping an owner and dog understand each other, she's doing exactly what she wants to do.

"I've always really liked to work with animals," Sulli-



Animal behavior expert Kelly Sullivan enjoys a moment with her terrier, Finley.

PHOTO BY ERIK ZYGMONT

van said, noting that she had worked as a veterinary technician for four years before she began specializing in training and behavior. "I wanted to make a difference in people's lives, and work with animals," she said.

Though she has been in business for less than half the year, Sullivan has some success stories. A woman with an English Bulldog deemed "aggressive" would have put her dog down, but

Sullivan empowered her to take control of her animal.

"It was a lot of leadership

stuff," said Sullivan, reiterating her argument that the human must be pack leader.

"They were letting the dog run around and do what it wanted."

A pit bull that showed a lot of aggression benefited from a year of Sullivan's work.

"She couldn't go near another dog, and now she can," Sullivan said.

She also argued that the word "aggression" is often over-used when it comes to dogs.

"Aggression is intent to harm, intent to kill," she said, noting that few dogs have that intent.

In addition to a pack-leader approach, Sullivan teaches reward-based training. Rather than punishing a dog for doing something bad, which they don't understand, she argued, she rewards them for doing something good.

When Finley, her terrier, barks, Sullivan ignores him, she said.

"I give him cheese when he sits quietly," she said.

According to Sullivan, punishing a dog might "put a band-aid on the problem," but it won't facilitate true behavior improvement.

And punishment can sometimes be detrimental to the desired results, she said. By rubbing a dog's nose in his mistake when he relieves himself indoors, you don't teach him that he shouldn't relieve himself in the house, but that he shouldn't relieve himself in front of you, Sullivan said, which leads to difficulties when you take your dog outside on a leash so he can go.

In addition to Doggonit Training, Sullivan currently works at the New Hampshire SPCA in Stratham, teaching obedience classes.

Sullivan has also helped to train dogs for Canine Com-

panions for Independence, an agency that provides service animals for people living with disabilities, and companion dogs for people suffering from illnesses such as severe depression.

Sullivan's methods are well tested—she has two dogs of her own, her terrier Finley, and a toy poodle named Paris. She and her fiancée also abstain from eating pork, in honor of their Vietnamese pot-bellied pig, Mu. Asian food lovers are probably familiar with that word, which appears on Thai restaurant menus.

For more information on Doggonit Training, visit www.doggonitnh.com, or call 729-3669.