

# The Future Looks Bright for these Lucky Students

By Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW, with  
Madeleine Choi and Andrew Rebollini

This is the fifth year of the collaboration between the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA (PHS) and the Pryor Foundation with students from Baden Continuation High School in South San Francisco, Calif. In addition to this year's students, we have a number of new participants to introduce: Stephen Redmond, school principal, Esperanza Flores-Aguayo, school counselor, and longstanding PHS volunteer and retired teacher Shirley Connors. Our stellar alumna, Sarah Aguiniga, has continued to volunteer and mentor students in the program, and will share her reflections on watching others follow in her confident footsteps.

The program includes twice weekly trips to PHS to clicker train animals in behaviors that will make them easier to handle in the shelter and increase their adoptability. These behaviors include good manners in doorways and around treats, standing still while a collar is put on or taken off, coming when called, overcoming shyness and fear of men, and walking on a leash without pulling. The students write feedback after each class and meet twice weekly at school to improve their writing.

The students also participate in four field trips so they can see the applicability of what they are learning to related fields and help them plan for their futures. These trips include: visiting the veterinary technician program at nearby Foothill College; a lesson in tagging (tag is an acronym for teaching with acoustic guidance, the application of clicker training to sports and other human behaviors) at the Winter Lodge Skating Rink; a trip to Palo Alto Animal



Services to observe Dr. Bonnie Yoffe spay and neuter shelter animals; and an afternoon at the Humane Society of Sonoma County's Forget Me Not Farms to learn about farm animals and organic gardening.

At the end of the program the students will have had enough diverse experience and mastered basic clicker training skills to qualify for entry level jobs in animal shelters, veterinary practices, pet supply stores, dog walking, and day care businesses.

Here is the students' version of their journey this year.

## Introductions:

### Andrew

*My name is Andrew Rebollini. I decided to volunteer because I thought it would be a great opportunity to learn more about animals and their behavior. I plan to continue volunteering for PHS.*

### Madeleine

*My name is Madeleine Choi. I chose to join this program because I have always had an interest in working with animals. My experience here was amazing; I enjoyed learning clicker training with dogs, rabbits, and cats. I also wanted to be a part of the program to start a path to my future career.*

**Four years ago I was a student** in this program. Little did I know how much it would change my life for the better. I have received scholarships and two internships at the Peninsula Humane Society in its behavior department. I authored and co-authored multiple articles, and now I assist with clicker training classes for PHS volunteers. None of this would have been achievable without the Baden High School and Pryor Foundation program.

Everything really changed for me in the second month of the program. We started working with an Akita mix named Glinda. She was extremely anxious and scared of everything and everyone during our first few training sessions. Every time I would click and treat for a good behavior, she would take the treat but then take three steps back just to eat it. Seeing her this anxious and nervous reminded me of myself. I was dealing with a lot of anxiety during this period of my life and that made simple tasks like showing up to clicker train the dogs nearly impossible. We worked with Glinda throughout the entire program; each time we worked with her she became more comfortable and relaxed with us as our skills increased. Seeing Glinda go from being completely shut down to showing affection toward us gave me confidence not only as a trainer, but also as a person. Glinda showed me that even if things seem terrifying at first, you can overcome them with a little time and patience.

Now I help mentor the current students in the program. I love working with the students because I see them come in not knowing anything about clicker training and leave as knowledgeable and confident trainers.

I am excited to see what the future has in store for me. I plan on moving to Los Angeles to study at Moorpark College in their Animal Science department where I will be able to learn about different kinds of animals, and possibly transfer to UC San Diego to enroll in their Veterinary Science program. The past four years of my life have been filled with amazing experiences and opportunities, all thanks to this program.

**Sarah Aguiniga**

## **What I have gained from participating in this program:**

### **Andrew**

*In the first module, we were introduced to clicker training, which is when you click and give a treat only for the good behaviors. My experience so far has been amazing because I feel like I have learned so much already in a short amount of time.*

*Being a male in this program is a very important role because a lot of the dogs in the shelter are afraid of men. Some have been abused, which might have traumatized them. What I do to teach the dogs to overcome their fear of men is to communicate with my body language that I am safe; never yell at them, but instead reward*

*their good behavior with a click and a treat.*

*This will build the dogs' trust in men because I give them the experience of a kind and patient man who rewards good behavior. If I'm giving them treats, they will believe other men may be nice and considerate like me, so the dogs are more likely to show good behaviors around men which will most likely get them adopted.*

### **Madeleine**

*Seeing the animals at the shelter really overwhelmed me – their body language showed me how scared they were. Luckily, clicker training has changed the animals' lives. Also, clicker training changed me because I was shocked by how much work it takes for an animal to become comfortable around people, and how the animal's behavior changes throughout the whole process. I have taught them that not everyone is harmful to animals. The first demonstration I did in front of an audience was good. I taught the audience how to clicker train the right way. It takes putting in a lot of patience and effort with every*



Andrew and Jay

animal. It has to be done right, and on time, and the trainer has to switch behaviors so the animal does not get bored or frustrated.

*We demonstrated clicker training for staff and volunteers at the shelter and I was thrilled by my success. I was nervous at first. I kept overthinking about messing up by accident, but I said to myself, "It's okay; it does not have to be perfect." While training all four dogs, I did not feel shy. I was presenting myself and each dog to the audience. After that, we each were asked questions about how we felt experiencing clicker training with the animals. Luckily, the questions were easy to answer. I felt so confident speaking aloud to the audience. I honestly did not expect it to be this fascinating. I am happy I did well. I believe the demonstration helped me get over my fear of presenting to a crowd.*

*Also, it has helped me gain confidence communicating with animals and humans. I hope this will get me hired with the skills I have learned in this program.*

## **What I am proud of doing in this program:**

### **Andrew**

*Working with three-legged dogs was a whole different experience. When training them I had to position myself correctly so I didn't make it difficult for the dogs. Also, it gave me more experience as a trainer. I always double checked to make sure my body language said I was safe and not harmful because some dogs are afraid of men.*

### **Madeleine**

*I worked with two dogs whose left hind legs had been amputated. I thought this might be a struggle, but working with them and training them went well. I streamlined my body language throughout the entire time. I helped them try to develop their strength and get used to having three legs.*

*I enjoyed working with the animals and bonding with them. I was amazed that training a three-legged dog isn't that hard, but you have to put the work into it. I have really streamlined my body language the entire time I've been at the shelter training animals.*

## **How this program has helped me set goals for my future:**

### **Andrew**

*I want to keep volunteering with PHS, and get a job as an adoption counselor. This program has taught me to be more*

**I am a longtime volunteer** at the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA with many years of elementary school teaching experience before that. Upon hearing of the opportunity to learn and work with clicker training and high school continuation students, I jumped at the offer. It turned out to be a very positive experience.

The class included four three-week modules with two days of clicker training at the Peninsula Humane Society, and two short periods of writing at Baden High School. Students began to learn clicker training by shaping behaviors in each other. They learned to respond to the clicker to attain a goal. Eventually, they clicker trained dogs, cats, rabbits, and even guinea pigs. The students learned the importance of clicking at the proper time to teach the learner to perform the correct behavior and earn a reward – a treat. They learned that body language is different for everyone and every animal, and that it is very important. The students were able to train old, young, active, inattentive and shy animals. They began to realize that the method of eliciting the behavior and clicking for it, then giving a treat, is very successful.

On the other hand, the writing portion of the class started out very slowly. The students were not answering the whole question on the daily feedback sheets. They could answer orally, but writing an informative and correct answer was difficult for them. The teacher used clicker training to inspire proper answers and hard work. The students persisted and their writing improved in detail, accuracy, and punctuation. As a former teacher, I was very excited for them.

Field trips and guest speakers rounded out the class with practical experiences.

I am very happy that I accepted this volunteer position. I appreciate the knowledge I acquired including how successful and fast clicker training can be with all species. Watching the students grow was especially rewarding. It is easy to see that the program had a positive influence on both the students and the animals.

**Shirley Connors**

**Empathy, self-awareness, and patience** are some of the skills this program helps develop. These students inspired me because I have seen their surge of growth in the short time I have been able to participate in the program. The dedication, hard work, and heart Andrew and Madeleine give each time they are with the animals are amazing. Their ability to articulate what they see and their responses to an animal's body language show their developing knowledge. I have watched Andrew and Maddie transition from students into teachers. The program provides Baden's students with invaluable experiences that help them explore pathways in preparation for life after high school.

*Esperanza Flores-Aguayo*  
*High School Counselor*  
*Baden High School*

**Students arrive** at Baden Continuation High School for a variety of reasons, and many come with not only academic deficiencies, but also feelings of defeat. The most important thing we try to provide is a fresh start. This fresh start gives the students an opportunity to have new experiences, to start a new chapter. As the Principal of Baden Continuation High School, I want to provide our students with positive experiences that enable them to build momentum as they transition into adulthood. Our collaboration with the Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA and the Pryor Foundation has given our students this opportunity.

All the students come in with a love for animals, and this gives them a foundation on which the Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA can build. To see the expressions on the faces of the students when they first started compared to the confidence that they exhibit as we approach the end of the year, is remarkable. It speaks to the potential and growth that can happen for students who have struggled. This has been a tough year for the students who started the program, and the Baden family is especially proud of the two who have completed the program. This collaboration has created an experience that both Andrew and Madeleine will benefit from long after they have graduated from Baden.

*Stephen Redmond*  
*Principal, Baden High School*  
*South San Francisco Adult Education*

*confident when working with dogs. Now I feel that I have the qualities needed to volunteer at an agency involved with all types of animals. After high school, I plan on going to Skyline College, and then transfer to Foothill College to specialize as a veterinary technician.*

*The field trip to Foothill College influenced me to set this goal. The field trip to Palo Alto Animal Services to observe Dr. Yoffe performing spays and neuters with the assistance of veterinary technician Jo Dixon, a graduate of the Foothill College program, further encouraged me. Seeing their professionalism firmed up my decision to attend Foothill College's veterinary technician program.*

### **Madeleine**

*After high school, I want to continue to volunteer at PHS. This program has taught me a lot, and I hope to share my skills and knowledge with people of all ages. I have always had a passion for saving and taking care of animals. This program and the staff and volunteers at PHS have motivated me to go further in my career path. I want to go to Skyline College to finish school first, then get involved with Fund Development at PHS. Hopefully, this will get me to what I want to do in my future, and keep me involved with the animals.*

### **Lynn's favorite moments this year:**

Andrew did some excellent clicker training with a dog who was exceptionally edgy around men. Andrew taught him good manners around treats and in doorways. At the end of a training session, I asked Andrew what he had accomplished and he replied, "I made a difference in that dog's life."

Madeleine is naturally graceful, but she tended to fidget. When she realized that this irrelevant motion distracted and worried the dogs, she stopped fidgeting. She realized that removing distractions would make her a better trainer and improve the experience she was giving the animals. I complimented her on how she had streamlined her body language, and this became her slogan. I wished that her written work were as tight and clear, and mentioned that to Madeleine one day. The next day's written work dazzled: It was concise and focused, without a single unnecessary word.

I asked Madeleine how, in only two days, she had improved her writing so much. She replied, "I streamlined my body language to communicate better with the dogs. Then, I streamlined my writing to communicate better with people."

