

# T H E Latham Letter

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PROMOTING RESPECT FOR ALL LIFE THROUGH EDUCATION

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## Realizing Potential: At-risk youth teach and learn from shelter dogs, cats, and rabbits

By Sarah Aguiniga, Mario Garcia,  
Karla Olvera, Ronaldo Ordenez,  
Brenden Patterson  
and Lynn Loar

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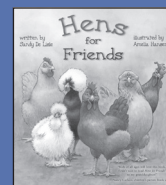
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INSIDE

# Realizing Potential:

## At-risk youth teach and learn from shelter dogs, cats, and rabbits

By Sarah Aguiniga, Mario Garcia, Karla Olvera, Ronaldo Ordonez, Brenden Patterson and Lynn Loar

### Introduction

Readers of the *Latham Letter* may remember reading in last spring's issue about a new program, Baden SHIP (Strategic Humane Interventions Program), a collaboration of the Pryor Foundation, the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA and Baden High School. The program offers at-risk students in an alternative school the opportunity to work with and train animals at the local animal shelter to increase the animals' adoptability. The students shadow shelter staff and volunteers to learn about job opportunities in animal welfare and to improve their academic skills. At the same time, they earn extra credit toward the hours they need for high school graduation.

Students apply in writing at the beginning of the school year, and the most serious few are offered a slot in this behaviorally and academically rigorous program. The program is divided into four modules, one in the fall and three in the spring

semester. Each module offers greater involvement with animal care and training and demands more and more reflective writing. The students write feedback at the end of every class and write an essay reflecting on what they have learned in order to graduate from the first module. We host a Module One graduation celebration at the high school and award graduation certificates and volunteer T-shirts from the shelter. Each student stands and reads his/her essay aloud to the assembled multitude of faculty, staff and interested others. This year a member of the school board attended! Below are their essays, revised now with the greater wisdom and experience learned in Module Two. Their writing assignments also include writing adoption resumes for the dogs they have trained, extolling the virtues and explaining the learning styles of each dog they have taught good manners and impulse control. The resumes are posted on the shelter's website and on each

animal's kennel.\* Students also take field trips to the veterinary technician program at nearby Foothill College, to Forget Me Not Farm\*\* in Santa Rosa, and to the Winter Lodge Ice Rink (where I coach) to learn Tagteach, an application of clicker training to athletic coaching. \*\*\*

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\* If you would like to see the adoption resumes, email me at [l.loar@comcast.net](mailto:l.loar@comcast.net). For more information on the design of the program and the importance of writing in AAT programs, check Latham's publication *Teaching Empathy: Animal-Assisted Therapy Programs for Children and Families Exposed to Violence* coauthored by Libby Colman and me.

\*\* *Faith and Hope on a Farm*  
[www.latham.org/order-our-products/videos](http://www.latham.org/order-our-products/videos).

\*\*\* "TAGs On Ice: Teaching new skills to children with special needs and their families" Libby Colman and Lynn Loar (available from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) or as a download from [www.tagteach.com](http://www.tagteach.com)).

## Students' Essays

### Sarah Aguiniga

One of the main reasons I decided to be a part of the program at the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA was to have a chance to work with animals, and I thought it would be a fun experience. My experience so far has been enjoyable and exciting. I love working with and training the cats, rabbits and dogs, helping better their chances for adoption and finding a loving home. I thought it was so interesting how quickly the dogs caught on with clicker training and what they had to do in order to get the treat.

# Sarah



The obstacles I had to face included becoming comfortable with my surroundings and working with the larger dogs. What helped me

overcome these obstacles was going back to the shelter to become more familiar with the environment and people. I am definitely more comfortable now compared to when I started. This program has taught me how to train animals without having to yell at them or to punish them for not getting it right away. I have learned how to approach dogs safely and know what their actions and body language indicate. The past two weeks at the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA have been a big learning experience for me because I have seen all of the progress I have made in my skills as a trainer. I believe this will definitely help me in the future to find a job or possibly furthering my knowledge and making this into a career working with animals. I am grateful to this program for providing me with a fun activity to do after school. I am definitely proud of what I have accomplished so far, and I am excited to see what I will learn in the future.

### Mario Garcia

Hello, my name is Mario Garcia, and I am very happy that I have completed the first module of volunteering with the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA. The main reason I was drawn to this program was due to my love of animals. The first module taught me a lot about clicker training and learning what animals are expressing to you through their body language.

I have realized that I have a passion for training the animals as well. The program taught me more about how to interact with all animals without making myself seem threatening.

It's also helped me personally in my life. It's taught me to have much more patience. In the beginning, I thought the training process was

# Mario



really stressful and irritating because I was unsure if what I was doing was right. After a few sessions, I found myself able to feel more at ease and relaxed. The newfound feelings helped the time go by much faster.

I look forward to interacting with all different types of animals and helping the animals become adopted into loving homes.



## Karla Olvera

When I heard about the program with the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA at school, I was very happy and willing to participate. I'm happy to be in this program, because I believe it will help me in the future. I was extremely excited not for the credits but to actually work with the animals. The first module was less intimidating than I thought. I have learned a lot about clicker training, and I am still surprised that you can also train a *fish*\* to learn new tricks.



When we first started clicker training, I was a little scared of messing up. After a while, I started getting better and better at it. I know how to feed two dogs at the same time without them fighting. Although cats aren't always interested, it is still a great experience working with them. When we went to the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA in Burlingame, CA, I was excited to know that we would have the opportunity to work with

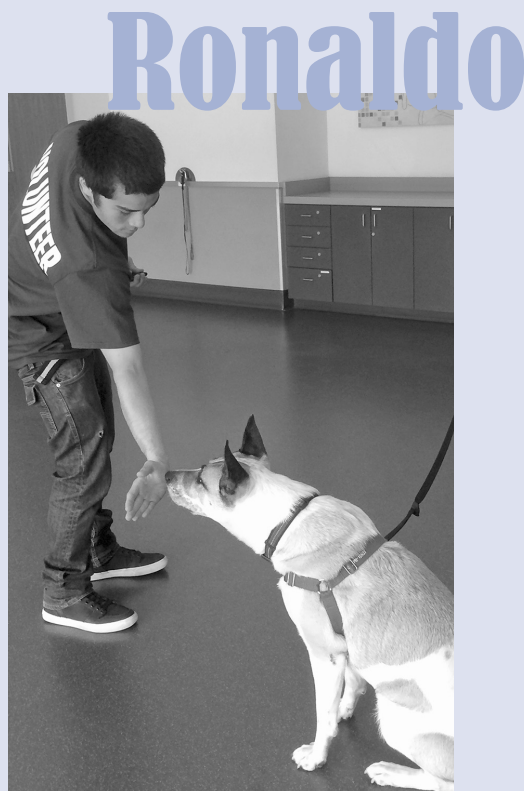
the animals outside of their cages. This program has helped me to work with the animals and understand them more. Most importantly, this program has inspired me to become a Veterinary Assistant. I cannot wait to go back and work with all the animals.

\* Karen Pryor's video *Shaping*, teaching a fish to swim through a hoop on cue, [www.clickertraining.com](http://www.clickertraining.com).

## Ronaldo Ordenez

I have enjoyed my experiences so far in volunteering for Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA. It was interesting to learn about clicker training, and I found it fascinating to learn that any animal could be trained using this method, or ones similar to it. I was proud of myself for developing my skills when training the dogs, cats and rabbits. It was somewhat difficult at first, but I found it to be easier with each session I spent practicing.

I enjoyed training the cats, rabbits and the dogs, but I thought the treat for the cats, allowing them to chase the moving stick the trainer holds, was a more interesting incentive than simply giving them a treat. The dogs had friendly personalities and were better with people than the cats were.



Training dogs was harder since they had to figure out relatively difficult tasks in comparison to the cats. The dogs had to figure out how to stop barking and to stand on all four legs while the cats simply had to touch the target stick.

Overall, I have found the experience informative and interesting. I am looking forward to going back and perfecting my skills in training and learning more about the different aspects of the animals' personalities in order to make sure they can become adoptable.

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**"The partnership of Baden High School with the Pryor Foundation and the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA has created an opportunity for students like this to learn and experience something new in an environment that encourages them to take risks and to succeed, maybe for the first time in their lives."**

*Michael Coyne, Baden High School Principal*

## Brenden Patterson

My name is Brenden Patterson, and I wanted to join this awesome program with the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA because I really love animals, and I wanted to learn how to teach them good behaviors.

I have learned how to teach dogs to calm down, bark less and keep their paws on the ground instead of jumping. I have also learned that many cats prefer play to edible treats as their reward. They responded to the opportunity to play. I dragged a little stick around the cage and watched them get excited by the stick making noise against their cage.



I have really enjoyed the program and all the things that we have done so far, and I have been able to take what I have learned and apply it to my life. When I used to go to my friend's house, his dogs always barked at me, but because of this program, I

have learned to walk slowly toward his dogs from a sideways angle. I extended my hand and made sure it was at an angle that was clearly visible to the dogs. Ever since that moment, the dogs haven't barked at me anymore. I look forward to every session with this program, and I'm really looking forward to learning more strategies to train every animal so that it can be adopted.

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**"By teaching good manners  
and impulse control to  
shelter animals, at-risk  
youth learn to recognize  
the impact of their body  
language and impulsivity on  
other living creatures."**

*Lynn Loar*

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## Michael Coyne Baden High School Principal

*The profile of a continuation high school student is frequently marked by prolonged academic and personal failure. A student who has experienced this pattern of failure often develops a poor self-image and consequently is less likely to attempt a new experience. The partnership of Baden High School with the Pryor Foundation and the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA has created an opportunity for students like this to learn and experience something new in an environment that encourages them to take risks and to succeed, maybe for the first time in their lives. The students all bring a passion for working with animals, and they are now finding success in an arena that may very well be their life's calling.*

## The perspective from the animal shelter

Animal shelters are busy and hectic places, always short of staff and funds, and reliant on the assistance of dedicated volunteers to meet the needs of the animals temporarily in their care. For this collaboration to work for the shelter as well as for the school and the students, we need to contribute to the welfare and future prospects of the animals. We do this by training the animals to have good manners including standing quietly rather than jumping and barking, waiting patiently for treats and ignoring food dropped on the ground, and walking calmly rather than pulling on a leash. Because we are a reasonably large group, five teenagers and four adults, we can teach the animals to ignore distractions, get used to a motley group of people and help animals overcome their fears of strangers.

## **Maria Jose Eguren, CABC**

**Director of Animal Behavior and Training  
Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA**

The partnership of the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA, the Pryor Foundation, and Baden High School gives a group of high school students an opportunity to learn clicker training, the importance of reading human and animal body language when interacting with animals, and various job opportunities in the animal field. The high school students work on their skills as trainers realizing that each animal is an individual and might need a different approach to maximize their learning experience, while the animals at Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA learn basic manners and impulse control which increases their adoptability. This practice not only helps the shelter animals but also shows the teenagers that everyone can have different learning styles, and the coordination between trainer and student is what matters.

Having worked with both human and animal behavior and the connection between them during my entire professional life, the transformations I observe during the time these students and animals go through this program never cease to amaze me. For this particular group it is endearing to watch them soften up, and accommodate their training style, to rabbits and small rodents.

With the help of a skilled volunteer and very little behavior staff time, this program gives Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA more insight into the animals' behavior by observing their responses to clicker training and their interactions with a group of teenagers and their teachers. It is definitely a win-win situation for all parties involved, and I am very proud to be part of it.

## **Conclusion**

Many students at alternative high schools find academics difficult. They also may not see academic achievement leading anywhere they can picture—nobody in their family has a job requiring a BA. When I say to students, “Let’s imagine that things work out well for you for the next several years. You’re now in your mid 20s. What does your life look like?” They really cannot answer.

Additionally, these students learn by doing more readily than they learn in a classroom. They learn more—and more enthusiastically—with a compelling experience first and then tackling the academics that pertain to that experience.

If students have experience volunteering in a shelter and can speak and write well, they will have little trouble finding employment in

## **SIDEBAR**

### **Gena Sands**

**High School Counselor  
Pupil Personnel Services**

*My name is Gena Sands and I work as a high school counselor for Baden High School in South San Francisco, CA. I have had the amazing opportunity to be a part of this incredible partnership with the Pryor Foundation, the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA and Baden High School. We have taken five students to the Humane Society to help the organization work with a variety of animals so that the animals can become more adoptable. It truly has been wonderful to witness the growth and maturity our students have displayed because of this program.*

*One of my goals as a counselor has been to help the students realize their potential both professionally*

*and personally. This program has enabled the students to become more open to new situations, adapt to the challenges that arise, and recognize their own personal strengths in overcoming those challenges. I have been impressed with each student's sense of calm and appropriate level of energy when approaching animals they don't know well. They are always amazing role models for me, especially since I am not able to attend every session. Each student is incredibly respectful and genuinely interested in helping each animal become adopted. Every experience with the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA allows the students to learn something new about themselves, and for that I am grateful.*



**Jane Kalish**  
**High School Counselor**

*Baden is an alternative high school in South San Francisco that serves students who were unsuccessful at a mainstream high school for reasons such as credit deficiency, truancy and lack of involvement. Each of our students at Baden is bright and unique, but most have not had the experience of being a part of something meaningful to them either in school, family or their community. The program at the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA has given these five students a special opportunity to be a part of something important.*

*The staff members and dedicated volunteers at the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA have shown a warm welcome and enthusiastic energy to our students. From the beginning, the learning environment has been interesting and challenging. The students were able to experience success as their abilities grew. I am so proud every time I see the students putting in so much effort with clicker training. They amazed me from the beginning of the modules but, as we progress, I am even more impressed by each student's unique style and ability. It is thrilling to see our students so engaged.*

an animal shelter. Shelters offer jobs in animal care, veterinary medicine, adoption counseling, humane education, behavior and training, and law enforcement (animal control and state humane officers [who, by the way, are mandated reporters of both child and elder abuse and neglect in CA]). Also, since shelters are open on weekends and provide care for animals around the clock, employees can arrange for schedules that allow them to continue their education and work.

So, by teaching good manners and impulse control to shelter animals, at-risk youth learn to recognize the impact of their body language and impulsivity on other living creatures. Because their dual motivation to work with the animals and to improve the animals' prospects for adoption is high, they pay close attention to the feedback the animals give and learn to pace the training sessions so the animals are successful learners. In my several decades working with at-risk humans clicker training shelter animals, the most common feedback I get is that the humans have learned patience—with the animals, with their children and parents, and with themselves.

Writing makes people clarify and organize their thoughts. Every student writes feedback at the end of every class, and I respond that evening. The students and participating faculty reply to my emailed reply between classes. They also write adoption resumes for the animals they have trained, end-of-module essays, and a publishable article for the *Latham Letter*. Mario made my day when he asked me how to spell

successive approximation while he was writing feedback last week. He used the term correctly to describe how he patiently taught a timid dog to approach him and wait to be offered a treat!



**About the author**

**Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW**, is a licensed clinical social worker and the president of the Pryor Foundation, [www.thepryorfoundation.org](http://www.thepryorfoundation.org), an organization that promotes methods that facilitate behavioral change exclusively through positive reinforcement. She specializes in abuse and neglect across the lifespan, and in the role that cruelty to and neglect of animals play in family dysfunction and violence. She is the author of numerous books on the role that animals play in family violence, including Loar, L. and L. Colman. (2004). *Teaching empathy: Animal-assisted therapy programs for children and families exposed to violence*, and Patronek, G., L. Loar, and J. Nathanson. (2006). *Animal hoarding: Structuring interdisciplinary responses to help people, animals and communities at risk*. She also coaches ice skating at the Winter Lodge Ice Rink in Palo Alto, CA and runs the Family Ice Skating Program for children with special needs and their families, the subject of the documentary *TAGs on Ice: Teaching new skills to children with special needs and their families*, directed and produced by Libby Colman.