

# Dog's love best leash

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## Justice Department's WOOF program helps man put troubled past behind him

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William Thompson was sent back to jail and knew he had to make major changes in his life.

He says the switch flicked for him with the offer of a new and inexpensive program at the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility in Dartmouth.

Initially costed at \$26,000, the Justice Department's Working on our Futures (WOOF) program allows inmates to train puppies and some adult dogs so the SPCA

can more easily put them up for adoption.

Thompson was the first person to sign up.

"I never had a dog in my entire life," he said in a recent interview. "I didn't even know if I was going to like the dogs."

He did.

Thompson, 40, was released to a halfway house three months ago. He gets leave privileges but must sleep there and has another three months to go.

"I'm more than capable and doing good," he said.

Thompson is now in training to be a volunteer at the SPCA and remains a vocal proponent of WOOF; something he made clear

“**I never had a dog in my entire life. I didn't even know if I was going to like the dogs.**”

**William Thompson  
WOOF participant**

in two opinion pieces published in The Chronicle Herald.

Still, he wanted to talk about WOOF once more and contacted the newspaper for this story.

A father of four teenagers, Thompson spent most of his life in Ontario, stayed out of trouble and opened a pita-wrap business that he sold before moving to Halifax. His children relocated to England but he had legal issues and couldn't go there, and he slipped into opiate addiction.

"It was hard to get away from the whole scene," he said. "To pull yourself away from it and realize, you know, what you had done wrong and who you were hurting and what you were taking

from the community."

He started selling drugs and shoplifting to afford drugs and ended up sentenced to 19 months in jail. He saw the negative side of accepting life as an inmate.

"If you become complacent with living in such a negative place, it starts to become a normal thing," Thompson said. "Every second, you're looking over your shoulder."

He did his stretch, got paroled and found he wasn't ready to start life over.

Now, he realizes he'd just gone through the motions during his time in jail.

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"I thought that I could do it all on my own, but then I fell right back into self-pity."

He got sent back to jail for more shoplifting and drug offences. Thompson started soul-searching and was ripe for an opportunity to take a new direction in life, such as the one offered by WOOF.

"When I went back in, I was ready for a serious change and that helped just be the catalyst."

He felt that the dogs started to rely on him. He began carrying himself with a new-found sense of compassion, and he thinks people saw that and started showing more faith in him.

He started getting small rewards like more time outdoors in the jail yard or access to a coffee

machine.

"Without the WOOF program, I don't think that I would have had any real drive," Thompson said. "That was the pinnacle . . . in the beginning of my recovery."

Sandra Flemming, who directs animal care for the provincial SPCA, said 85 dogs have been trained through WOOF, and adoptive owners have been happy with the trained pets they've received.

"The puppies are going home fully trained at eight to 10 weeks," she said. "The feedback we're getting from the adoptive homes is that it's just amazing having a puppy that knows how to sit at that age."

She isn't surprised that inmates like working with the dogs. She regularly sees people from all walks of life donating their time to clean dog cages and do other

volunteer work for the SPCA.

"People just connect and gravitate towards animals," she said.

As for the inmates, Flemming believes WOOF gives them a positive feeling they might not otherwise experience.

"I do believe that the program is definitely helping the offenders in taking pride in what they do in learning new skills."

Another booster is Nancy Hynes, who works with a Christ-based organization called Pathways to Freedom Ministries that tries to mentor inmates through faith.

Hynes, who loves dogs and has trained them for 20 years, sees common ground between WOOF and her program. One similarity is the external focus that either faith or a dog provides. Too often, inmates have their problems front and centre and could use something positive to grab onto,

she said.

"They're focused on the system and what's happened to them and what's happened to their family and their circumstances and all that."

She said the people who thrive after their release have often found a positive connection to their community. They can have new friends or new goals that often represent a change from the circumstances that landed them in jail.

Hynes also said inmates find unconditional love in both programs.

"The dog accepts them and Christ accepts them."

In July, Justice Minister Ross Landry said WOOF was being extended for another year.

Thompson is happy about that, and he's also happy the Justice Department is trying out a similar

program at the Cape Breton Correctional Facility. Called Re-Cycle, it will provide inmates with found, recovered or donated bicycles to repair. The bikes will then be distributed to kids who might not otherwise have a working set of wheels.

"It's a great idea," Thompson said. "If it keeps going the way it's going, more success stories are going to come out. There are some really good guys that are in there that are inmates."

Now that he's straightening out, Thompson said he's been able to reconnect with his children, which is emotional and meaningful for him.

He's starting to make some money and believes he can someday find a way to open another pita-wrap business.

"It would flourish down here," he said.