

Jacqueline Pinol:

The Canine Condition. Come, sit, stay. Welcome to The Canine Condition Podcast. My name is Jacqueline Pinol, I am an actor, documentary filmmaker and animal rescue advocate. The Canine Condition Podcast is a platform to bring awareness to dog adoption and to provide all dog lovers and pet owners with information and resources on how to raise a healthy and well-balanced dog. If you are thinking about getting your first dog or just want to know where and how you can help a dog in need, this is also a place for you.

Don't bully my breed. Many of you have heard or seen that phrase. If you don't know what it means, it is saying, don't spread misinformation or fear about bully breed dogs, which are the pit bull type dogs, the American Staffordshire Terriers, the American bulldogs. Don't bully my breed is a phrase and a message that I would like, not just for the general public to understand, but for the media who gets to decide what stories make the local and national news, for the politicians across this country who choose which animal protection laws to push for and which ones to vote against, to home insurance company executives, to landlords and housing management company employees.

I am saying to you, get informed, meet and hug and spend quality time with pit bull type dogs, because only then can you stop labeling them under one umbrella, only then will you stop creating rules and regulations that actually add to the overpopulation of homeless dogs in this country, only then will you see that they are indeed sensitive, loyal, lovable beings who need guidance, just like all other dog breeds. They are individuals and each must be seen and treated as an individual.

My guest on the podcast today chose to advocate, protect and educate anyone who will listen about these innocent and good natured beings. Stephanie Paluch is the founder of the non-profit dog rescue organization, Players for Pits, based in Chicago, Illinois. This foster home-based rescue is dedicated to saving as many bully breed or pit bull type dogs from Chicago and the suburbs, while striving to give each one another chance to become an integral part of the community by matching them with families that will advocate and love them forever.

The goal of Players for Pits is to decrease the amount of pit bull type dogs dying in our local shelters and help Chicago and the entire nation become no kill. And why Players for Pits? Well, that is a brilliant way to bring two passions together to take action for the greater good. And Stephanie will share with us what that's all about.

Hi, Stephanie, welcome to The Canine Condition Podcast.

Stephanie Paluch:

Hi, thank you so much for having me.

Jacqueline Pinol:

I'm super excited that I get to chat with you once again about one of our absolute favorite breeds in the world, our pittie and pit bull type dogs. So Stephanie, let's start from the very beginning. Players for Pits began in 2013, for any listeners, who may not be familiar with your rescue, tell us why it is named Players for Pits, and how you got started.

Stephanie Paluch:

This is a pretty common question and I totally get it, it's kind of an odd name. Players, what's that even mean? I'm a big baseball fan, I have been my whole life. Probably saying just that is an understatement in itself.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's fun.

Stephanie Paluch:

I've even worked for major networks and regional networks and stuff, so if there was a game where... I was actually down in Florida watching the Palm Beach Cardinals, and I'm sitting up in the stands, it's like two hours before the game starts and I'm watching the PFPs in the outfield, which pitcher fielding practice. You don't have pitcher fielding practice on a bad day, it's sunny out. If it's raining, it's canceled.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, okay. I know nothing about baseball, by the way. So I'm learning from you right now as we speak.

Stephanie Paluch:

Okay. Well, this is one of my favorite parts of the game. So it's before the game, the guys are in the outfield, they're all in the outfield, the pitchers and stuff, and you get to see their personalities. The guys are having fun, they're joking around with each other, they're pretending to be outfielders making diving plays and everything. So I'm sitting there thinking, and I had already had this discussion that I want to start a dog rescue somehow. I was really disappointed with how things were going with the culture of pit bulls in Chicago, so my wheels were already turning.

And I feel like whenever I get an idea, I don't fully develop it until I get a name. So I started thinking PFPs, that's my favorite acronym right now. And I'm like, "What can I do PFPs?" I'm like, "Oh my God, Players for Pits." It just happened out of nowhere. So I sat there the rest of the game, thinking about this and I'm like, "Oh my God, this is going to be great. I'm going to use baseball, I'm going to connect it to pit bulls. I'm going to have baseball players use their platform to help pit bulls." And then it just started spiraling.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Wow. So really you thought of all this prior to this even starting?

Stephanie Paluch:

Yes.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's awesome.

Stephanie Paluch:

Yeah. I had been involved in animal advocacy for so long, and even since I was like 14, 15, I was volunteering at shelters with my mom. So I knew I always wanted to do it, it just took till I got that name and the connection to really make it develop.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's so awesome. And I love that you didn't even think about how will it happen, you just said, "I'm going to do it, all I need is a name." Talk about being proactive and saying, "I can do this." No obstacles in your mind.

Stephanie Paluch:

And I think that sometimes when you're just very passionate about something, you just make it happen. And you might have to figure it out along the way, there might be some obstacles, but if you're truly passionate about something, and I took my two passions, baseball and saving dogs and combined them into one, and now here we are.

Jacqueline Pinol:

It's fantastic. And to my listeners, I've said this in other podcast episodes, sometimes you might think, "What could I possibly do? I'm an accountant." Or, "What could I possibly do? I'm a teacher." But there's always something you can do, and it can still be tied into what you do as a part of your daily life. And it could be something really small and make a huge difference for animals and people around the country. So Stephanie, you and I met in 2016, when you so graciously accepted to do an on-camera interview for my documentary, which now after many obstacles, speaking of obstacles, is now on his way to seeing the light. Tell me how your rescue has changed since you and I met in 2016?

Stephanie Paluch:

In 2016, I was like two to three years of in rescue, so much has changed since then. We seen a lot of worse things. I think that's just the sad reality of it, is we've seen even more bad in the world. But, every single time we have a bad situation, people step up, so you see the beauty in people too. It really has changed just my view on life in general. The rescue is a lot more productive. We found easier ways to do things, we found what not to do. We've learned from mistakes, and we've become better at helping the breed just along the way.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And you are committed to saving and helping, in my opinion, one of the most vilified breeds of dogs. All the bad publicity is truly unfounded because having my own pit bull type dogs, I will say that these bully breed does are some of the most loving, sensitive, and loyal beings that one could ever meet. How much of what you do has to do with educating and proving to people that these dogs are indeed innocent, loving beings, and that they deserve a chance and advocacy?

Stephanie Paluch:

So much of what I do is because of that. I don't know what really drew me to pit bulls in the beginning, but I think maybe hearing people just talk poorly about them, meeting them, seeing they're just another dog, and just being like, "I need to help in this situation." When I got my first pit bull, I was like, "This is a connection I've never had with another dog before." She's amazing. She's next to me right now snoring. You'll probably hear her throughout this.

Jacqueline Pinol:

What's her name?

Stephanie Paluch:

Miley.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Miley. Ooh, that's so sweet.

Stephanie Paluch:

I wanted her to be like a carefree spirit? Education, it's so important. And one of the things we've learned, going back to your last question is, back in 2016, I think I was a lot more critical of people then. I think when people came to me and they'd say things like, "Oh, pit bulls are awful dogs," I'd probably come back with some witty comment or something mean or something else, just derogatory because it upset me. Whereas now, five years after that, people come to me and they say, "Pit bulls are the worst dog in the world. Or, they're just going to bite, just wait for that."

I come to that now more with compassion towards those people, and I've learned that you're never going to change someone's mind by being mean, you're only going to change them by talking to them and by explaining. And I use my own dogs to help people understand that too. But also, you see the stuff I post on Facebook, sometimes it's a very sad videos and everything. You've got to get to people somehow and make them care about them as beings versus dogs too. The education's never going to end, and I think that just goes for animals in general, just their care. But pit bulls especially, because they're still vilified by everybody.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And it's the bad stories that make the news, which other rescue organizations have shared with me. It's always, the bad story makes the news, and we are the feel good stories. There need to be more of those out there, which is why I'm so glad that Players for Pits has such a wonderful platform on Facebook, and I see you on Instagram. You're constantly getting the word out. You're a foster-based rescue, right?

Stephanie Paluch:

We are. Yeah.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Okay. So talk to us a little bit about the setup of your rescue and why it's especially hard sometimes, because if you don't have foster homes, you can't take in more dogs.

Stephanie Paluch:

Right. Being a foster-based rescue is the cheapest way to go about it. You don't have the overhead of owning a building, you don't have to keep up with bills or anything like that, you don't have to have staff. We are still completely volunteer-based, that's something that was really important to me from the very beginning of starting the rescue. The fosters, it's a positive and a negative. You have to depend on people to want to step up to save dogs, which is the negative because there's never enough people. But the positive is, you get these fosters who have the biggest hearts in the world. And they see a dog in need and they take that dog into their homes, their hearts, their families, their neighborhoods, and it does something magical for the dogs versus a shelter.

I'm not saying anything negative about shelters because honestly, if I had the money, I'd get one in a second just to save more, but the foster piece of it, it does require more work. But it honestly, I think has the biggest and greatest outcome for the dogs.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Of course. Yeah. Because you're setting them up for success of learning to be in a home around people, sometimes around on kids, cats, other dogs. You're able to find the right environment for that dog. And also, a shout out to all you fosters for Players for Pits, or if you foster for any rescue, I know that a lot of people don't want to do it because they think it's just too hard to let them go. But to all of you who are willing to do it and take that chance at having your heart a little bit broken, but for the good, I applaud that. I know that's really, really hot. I've done it myself, and I foster failed three times because of it.

Stephanie Paluch:

Five times for me.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Well, there you go. And all pity mixes, but I love them and I wouldn't have it any other way. Let's talk about an issue that comes up a lot in the pit bull type dog rescue world, which is BSL. I do meet a lot of people and have a lot of friends and family that have no idea what the letters BSL stand for, which is breed specific legislation. Can you talk to us a little bit about that?

Stephanie Paluch:

BSL is probably one of the most irritating things possible, but it's something we have to deal with on a daily basis. Before the pandemic started, there were tons of intervention programs going on in Chicago like keeping pets out of the shelter. And it's been a really positive thing here. But once the pandemic started, we had to halt all those in-person things where we would actually get to speak to the owners and keep them with their pets. But one of the biggest reasons for giving up a pet was the pit bulls just weren't allowed in rented housing. There's too many rules against it because the insurance carriers think that pit bulls are too much of a liability.

So it really does go all the way to the top. Some of these companies, they're just doing what their insurance tells them to do or what they're not allowed to cover, but at the same time, what they say is that no dangerous breeds, and then they classify dangerous breeds as our pit bulls, our rottweilers, German shepherds, Dobermans, the list goes on. Meanwhile, if you really actually look at the statistics, the pit bulls aren't the most dangerous dogs. It's the ones that people think they can just walk up and hug and that dog is like, "Oh no, I'm not a fluffy teddy bear."

It's a constant battle. It's something I wish I was a little bit more involved in. I feel like we're on the front lines with the pit bulls every single day and it gets exhausting, so I wish I was more involved with fighting BSL per se, versus just what's in front of my face and needs addressed immediately.

Jacqueline Pinol:

I get you. Yeah. Well, also you don't have to deal with... In Chicago, you don't have the actual legislation that prohibits pit bulls from living in certain areas or towns or cities like we've heard in Canada, they have actual cities or counties that won't allow any pit bulls to live there.

Stephanie Paluch:

Right. And even like Denver used to have BSL, and they just got rid of it.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Yes. Bravo to Denver.

Stephanie Paluch:

We just had an adopter move there, and he was really, really nervous. He's like, "I need all the vet records of the dog, I need everything. Anything you can say." Because when they moved there, they had to have their dog evaluated because it's still new there, they just got rid of BSL there. Of course their dog passed with flying colors. I appreciate that people want to make sure safe dogs are living in their communities, but it just sucks that they're just evaluating the pit bulls.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Well, that's what I was just about to say, you took the words out of my mouth. I'm like, "Well, why aren't they doing that with Pomeranians and French bulldogs?" I have met mean Pomeranians and French bulldogs, let me tell you, and I've been more afraid of them than my pitties who are 50, 60 pounds. So that's what's crazy. It's like, "Yeah, if we're talking about safe communities, then let's just do that for all the dogs across the board." Miami Dade County, I think, has a BSL, which is really unfortunate because people will still have them. And then like you said, what happens when they get caught?

Jacqueline Pinol:

And if the law comes down and says, "Hey, you can't have that dog here," to the shelter they go.

Stephanie Paluch:

Oh, and it's so traumatizing for the families too, because they love their pets and they do everything they can for them. And then when they have to bring them in just because the breed isn't allowed. You see dogs being ripped away from their families and kids. I heard some stories. We went down to Miami for the hurricane in 2017 and we stopped by Miami Animal Control Services there. And I was told it was an awful facility, they euthanize every pit bull that comes in there. It was the most beautiful facility I've ever seen. They had lavender in the kennel runs, they had classical music playing.

And they told us that they actually have somebody come in, a breed specialist who identifies the pit bulls, but can identify other breeds they could possibly be too. So they still adopt them out, they just can't adopt them out immediately into Miami.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Yeah. I think that there's a fair share of shelters that don't have the resources or the means to do a wonderful job or make it look beautiful, there's sheriff shelters who are not doing things by the book. And then there's a plethora of wonderful shelters across the nation. And I have also been proven wrong against those myths that I hear about shelters. When I visited Chicago animal care and control in 2016, it was pretty full of dogs, but I'll tell you, it was clean, it was organized, they were attentive. And you got to walk us through and give us a tour. Tell us how that shelter in particular benefits from partnering with rescues like you, Players for Pits, so that they can get the word out about their dogs?

Stephanie Paluch:

Chicago is very lucky. There's like 200, probably plus, rescues out this way. And granted, most of them don't take pit bulls, but there's still a majority that do. 95% of the dogs you see in there are still going to be pit bulls or pit bull type dogs, any type of mix. But they do really well because they're very active in the community now because of their rescue relationships. When they need something, they reach out to the rescues directly and say, "Hey, this dog came in with a broken leg, we don't know if we can keep it overnight. It has to go tonight and rescue start working on it."

Which is really nice because in the past, they would fear backlash, they would say, "Oh, well, if people know we're going to euthanize this dog, they're going to come after us." So they wouldn't ask for help in the past. Now, the shelter staff that they have has a good connection with the rescues where they can put that information out there and they could get feedback and try to get that dog into rescue that night by 7:00 PM.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Okay. That's awesome. So they are responsive? There's shelters that you'll email and call and you won't hear for days. And so when you're in the dark like that, you're wondering what's happening to the dog in the meantime.

Stephanie Paluch:

Right. You saw Fielder, which I'm sure we'll talk about at some point today.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, I would love to. Yes.

Stephanie Paluch:

He was one that came in really late. It was December 15th. He came in super late that night and we had like 10 minutes to decide if we were going to take him, otherwise they would have had to euthanize him just out of pure responsibility of not letting him suffer overnight without care. So they do a really good job of their outreach now and connecting with the rescues. They have their animal placement coordinators who know which rescues need what dogs and what they're best at, which happened over time in building those relationships. They obviously know we love the pitties, they know our type.

So anytime something like that comes in, they let us know. And we're usually able to rescue within three days.

Jacqueline Pinol:

I know you were mentioning that BSL is an obstacle for your rescue because if people have to surrender their pets due to renting or where they live, it keeps you from having a space for that dog last minute. But given all you and your team do for so many dogs every day, why do you think you still see so many homeless, abused, and neglected bully breed dogs in Chicago? What's the lay of the land out there for people who've never been to Chicago or Illinois?

Stephanie Paluch:

Well, Chicago is a very populated area. I don't know specifics, but I think there's over three million people here, just in this general area, so it's very densely populated. There are a lot of low-income areas too, where people may want to be breeding dogs to sell them, just to get by. And it sucks. I'm against backyard breeding in every way, shape and form. It's also unregulated here. We don't have pet limits for most of the houses in Chicago, so that's why we get a lot of hoarding cases.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh really? You don't have like three tops? I think ours is four in LA.

Stephanie Paluch:

Yeah. Ours is three here in the suburbs where I am, but in Chicago, there is no pet limit. They say, "As long as you're taking care of your animals and they're in good health, you can have as many as you want." So it does leave that door open. So when people get in situations where all of a sudden they have 50 poodles in their house, they can reach out without consequences and get help.

Jacqueline Pinol:

So there's no regulation. They say you can have as many, as they're well taken care of, but nobody's making sure they're well taken care of until it gets really bad and it's reported?

Stephanie Paluch:

Exactly, until neighbors start calling about smells, nobody really is on top of it. There's so much crime here, they have so many other things to worry about that hopefully soon... We used to have an animal task force with 10 officers on it, we don't have it anymore. So hopefully, someday we get that back, but everything's expensive here in Chicago.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Yeah. Most of the metropolitan cities have gotten to that place. And then of course the animals are at the bottom of the totem pole in terms of funding and priority. Do you have to deal with a lot of fighting rings in Chicago? Do you hear stories about that? Saving dogs from fighting rings?

Stephanie Paluch:

Surprisingly, yes. It seems like you can just spend day in Chicago and everything seems fine, but we are always one of the first calls when there is something that's busted. I don't remember the last time they've actually caught an actual dog fighting ring in progress. We took 20 dogs back in September of last year, we called them The Forever 21 Crew, because there's actually 21 dogs and one was found deceased on the property. And I needed some bells just because I saw his picture, I saw his giant collar, he's emaciated. He was like the bell for us that sounded off to everybody else. He saved the rest of them.

Police officers were just doing a regular patrol, they heard some dogs barking. They couldn't do anything about it because there is no pet limit, so they had to wait to get permission to go in. And by the time they got permission, the one dog had already passed away. Because that dog was dead on the property, they were legally able to take the rest of the 20. There's no doubt in my mind that the guy who had these dogs, who is still at large, by the way, never caught, he was selling them for dog fighting rings, 100%. They were chained up in the yard. They had everything on the property you could think of for dog fighting.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh God, it's so gross, it's sickening.

Stephanie Paluch:

And he was poorly breeding them. Yeah. It was just really bad.

Jacqueline Pinol:

How hard would it be to pass laws that have limits on pets? In one instance, you think like, "Oh, it's so great because we can foster five or six at once," if everyone was fostering. But that opens the loophole for people to be able to have all these dogs on a property and for the police not to be able to do anything because the law can't stand behind them, because it doesn't exist. What would people have to do, voters, local legislation?

Stephanie Paluch:

There'd have to be a major push from the community. There's a lot of groups that do support these efforts and they go to the hearings and they talk to the city, but there really isn't that much support behind it. So if people do care about a certain cause, look it up in your community, see what's going on, and fully support it, get your friends involved. Whatever they're asking for, help. Even if it's signing a petition, it really does go far. I think in Chicago, we have a very long way to go, unfortunately. Animal control is the most underfunded part of the city.

I just learned this last weekend because we attended a conference, but animal control only has 70 full-time employees and they take in 15,000 dogs a year. And then we heard this other shelter down in Florida, they have 270 volunteers with 72 full-time staff and they take in 2000 dogs a year.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Wow. What a difference?

Stephanie Paluch:

It was just mind blowing. How do you have 70 employees for 15,000 dogs a year? You don't have the time. So they need more funding, they need more employees. Everything in Chicago, we just need more. We're always short with dogs and animals.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And if people would realize, even if you don't like dogs... And I'm constantly saying this, whenever this topic comes up, if people would realize that you don't have to be a dog lover, you don't have to have dogs, you don't have to be adopting and fostering and involved in the rescue movement, but if you care about the value of your home, the safety of your community, the safety of your property, your children and your family in your neighborhood, you would stand up for these causes and fight to have these kinds of laws in place so that you do live in a safe and beautiful place.

Stephanie Paluch:

Right. And I do think a lot of people think someone else will do it. If this truly is a problem, someone else is going to do it, it's going to get taken care of. And they don't realize it's actually been a problem forever, and it's going to keep being a problem until there's a huge cultural shift.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And that someone else is you, everybody out there. If you live in Chicago, if you live in Illinois, if each of you spoke up and reached out via email or phone calls to your local legislation and your city council members, believe me, oh my gosh, you would feel so empowered at seeing the changes that would happen when all of you stand together and speak up. People don't usually believe that, and then I see it happening. I've seen it happen here in Los Angeles, which is a huge city, and we have small victories and then it spreads and we really start to get legislation, like spay and neuter laws were passed.

Now, we can break windows if we see dogs and hot cars and I will not be liable for breaking that window because I'm saving the dog's life. That is completely legal now in Los Angeles.

Stephanie Paluch:

I love that. Absolutely.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And that's because enough people spoke up, enough petitions were signed and people showed up and called local legislation. And those politicians I have learned from, I had an attorney on an episode a couple of weeks ago, and he said, your local legislators do not want phone calls and emails, but if you bombard them in a kind way and say, "Hey, I voted for you, I support you. Please support this need in my community," they will listen. They will start to listen because they'll have no choice.

Stephanie Paluch:

Right. You just have to make the call, have to send the email, have to make them respond.

Jacqueline Pinol:

You do. You would do it for your children, you would do it to make sure you keep your jobs and the safety of your community, and this is part of it. Sorry if I sound like a broken record to my listeners, but I just want to get that point across because I'm very passionate about it, and I know that it works if you guys just trust me. Trust me and Stephanie, do it, and you will see changes in Chicago. Stephanie, tell me a story about a dog, which you named Fielder. I would love to hear his story in detail because I don't actually know all the details. A dog that beat all the odds and is a pittie-type dog and got adopted by a wonderful family. What was his story?

Stephanie Paluch:

It has to be my new favorite story. I have favorites all the time, but Fielder was the emotional, the physical, everything, every feeling you could possibly feel, Fielder did that. And he has multiple views of his story. I always like to mention this when I talk about Fielder, the people animal control that saw him come in and then there's the foster's view, there's the rescues view, he affected so many people, even the surgeon that took care of him. So I just talked to him today and he goes, "How's Fielder doing?" This dog affected everybody.

But from the beginning... Fielder came into animal control in December 15th of last year of 2020, and he was missing, literally missing a chunk of his face. And you could see his bone exposed in his face. And it went on his left side by his mouth, and it was like a hollowed out shell type thing. You could see his insides. It was very, very terrifying. The first video I got from animal control was him laying on the ground, very calm and everybody talking about him and then just realizing that he's a boy. Like, "Oh, he's a boy."

And as you're seeing this, he's wagging his tail at what they're saying to him, and you see blood drip out of his nose. It broke my heart, but those are the times where in rescue I'm very, very blessed to just be able to be the one to say yes and just be like, "Hey, we're taking this dog guys, let's figure it out."

Because the other times, you have to post for foster, you have to wait for somebody to step up. But medical is really what we strive at and we have the people who can help out with that. So immediately I posted a play, "Who wants to go pick this dog up?" I wasn't available, I'm pretty sure I was at work that night.

And somebody stepped up right away, went to go get him from animal control. Then met a transporter who then shifted him and took him to the emergency vet. I'm calling the emergency vet, giving them the heads up, being like, "Hey, this dog is coming and it's pretty much missing a piece of its face." And they're like, "Oh gosh." Because they've seen the dogs we've brought in, it's the worst medical cases you can think of. And so they all start getting ready and their staff is on, and they know how I operate, I want facts, I just need details right away, whatever you know I need to know so we can make the best decision for the stock.

Because number one, I'm thinking, "Is it cruel to keep the dog alive? Is he suffering too much?" And then when we met him, his tail wouldn't stop wagging. This dog is bleeding nonstop, and just literally dying in front of our face, and his tail is going 100 miles an hour. So we ended up finding out that a neighbor or somebody in Chicago saw this dog just laying in their front yard. We don't know if he was hit by a car and dragged, we don't know if it was chemicals involved. There's a whole bunch of different situations that could have happened, but she flagged down a cop and the cop was the one that took the dog to animal control and got him to us.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, how awesome. He's so awesome.

Stephanie Paluch:

He's the most resilient dog I've ever met in my life. He ended up living at the emergency vet, which is a 24-hour vet, which is extremely expensive. He lived there for two months.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh my goodness. Yeah, those are some hefty bills.

Stephanie Paluch:

He ended up costing us, I'll say, like I posted it, over \$30,000, and that's with a rescue discount, which there were so many things that the surgeon did for free for us in this situation. But he basically lived there because he needed twice a day bandage changes. And as things progressed, he started losing his skin over his whole body. So where we think he might've been dragged a little bit, that skin started to declare itself very quickly as necrotic, but it kept spreading which he was in a pretty much full body cast.

And some people were negative on our comments saying like, "Oh, you shouldn't put this dog through this, he's suffering and everything." But even the surgeon will tell you, this dog was thriving at the vet, which never happens with dogs. When they get to the vet, they usually shut down, they're so nervous and scared. Every day he made progress, even though his wounds were getting worse, they were declaring themselves early, which gave the vets time to work on them. And I just remember he was the happiest dog through it all. He had open wounds in his face and he was letting people touch them, no aggression or anything.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Having your own dogs, you know when something's wrong, you would know if he was telling you, "Hey, I can't do this, you got to let me go."

Stephanie Paluch:

And it was three days into it and the vet called me, the surgeon, and everything had been positive before, "I think we're going to be able to get through this. It's going to be a long road, but he's going to be able to make it, we think." And then three days later he calls me and I could just hear his voice shaking, which is very odd for Dr. Szpindor. He's a very composed man. And he just said, he's like, "I just have to tell you, I'm not sure he's going to make it." Because that night he had lost so much skin that they weren't even sure that they would be able to bandage him up to cover the open wounds at that point.

So without getting too graphic, we had a long conversation and he goes, "In any other situation, just because of funds, we would probably be telling the family there's no way they could afford this, and they should probably put him down safely." Now, we're very blessed because we have the support of 26,000 people on Facebook and their friends. We have 18,000 people on Instagram. So we know that when we post something like this and we're transparent, that people are going to support the dog, which is very important to us.

When he told me that, and I said, "Okay, but we don't have to make the decision tonight. So what if we touch base tomorrow morning and just regroup? Let's give us the night to think about it." And then that next morning he said that he was thinking about it all night as was I, and he goes, "If you're willing to keep trying, let's just keep going." So at that point, we took it every hour by hour at that point, which I mean, emotionally draining, it consumed our lives for the two weeks where every couple of hours we get an update just to see if he was crashing or doing better. And every single update was him doing better.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And he's beautiful. He's like a chocolate, brown pittie. I've seen pictures.

Stephanie Paluch:

He is so tiny too. He's like 40 pounds.

Jacqueline Pinol:

I know. He's so cute. You know what, I am going to post pictures of Fielder on our social media so that when you guys listen to this episode, you can stare at the beautiful photos of him, and it won't break your heart as much, but it just will open your eyes to why it's important to save these dogs, and to donate, and to support, and to foster. He is a clear indication of why it's worth going that extra mile for these innocent beings. Isn't it?

Stephanie Paluch:

It is. And I'll send you some pictures too. When he was done with all of his vetting, it took five months, maybe almost six months. This is like a full-time vet staff, they had a party for him on his last day. They bought him a cake, there were some streamers, there were signs. They all signed a bandana for him. His foster mom posted so many videos of her crying, like happy tears. And she ended up adopting him. How could you not after that experience?

Jacqueline Pinol:

She did? Probably I just got the chills. I love that.

Stephanie Paluch:

It was such a bad story and it just turned into such a feel, good, happy story. So anyone who donated just \$10, they helped us get to that. They helped him have a second chance at life.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's really wonderful. Congratulations. And thank you. Thank you for all that you do for these pups. I love them all. It's hard not to. And I follow your page and I see the work that you guys all do. You have some amazing, dedicated foster families who are just so awesome. Tell me also how, since you started the conversation, tell me about the baseball tying into players for pets, how has the baseball community helped your rescue? What are some of the fun things that they've helped you so that Players for Pits can exist?

Stephanie Paluch:

Before the pandemic, things were a lot easier, but we do have some major league baseball players who still support us. A lot of them, I'll just post a dog in need and they'll sponsor something for the dog. One of our biggest supporters is Liam Hendriks. He's actually on the White Sox this year, for the past couple years, he's out in California playing for the Oakland A's.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, well, there you go. And I didn't know that.

Stephanie Paluch:

Exactly. His wife and I connected years ago back when they were in the minor leagues. And I had posted just in a group that we were in together, and I was like, "Hey, I'm looking for people, baseball world who want to help in my rescue." She reached out immediately and we've been working with him ever since. And now he's like one of the best relievers in baseball. He's closing out all the games for the White Sox. So we're very lucky that this year, we're fully open Chicago now, everyone's getting vaccinated out here. So we're back to normal, almost fully. We get to go support Liam now at the games, after everything that they do for us.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, that's so cool. I love that. So baseball fans out there, if you are looking for a place to support a nonprofit rescue organization, just put all that energy into saving some dogs in Chicago, Players for Pits is definitely the best place to go. I love Stephanie that on your adoption application, you call it an adoption survey. I've never actually seen that before. And it's a brilliant way to address that process, I think, an adoption survey. Tell me what is on the survey and about your match me to a dog check box on the survey?

Stephanie Paluch:

Absolutely. We started at a few years ago, I want to say like maybe 2017 or 2018. We attended Best Friends National Conference every single year. They're the largest no-kill rescue in America. And they are all about making it easier to adopt. If we truly want our nation to be no kill, we need to take off some of the things that we turn people away for. For example, like we have always from the beginning adopted out to people in apartments, whereas a lot of other places their rescues would be like, "No, you need a fenced in yard. You need a house that you own or fenced in yard for stability of the dog."

But what we've learned over time is that it doesn't matter how much money you make, if you love an animal, you have an animal, and it's part of your family. So we changed it from adoption application to adoption survey because application gives the impression that you can get denied. We don't like to say that you're denied. And also that's sitting in the back of people's minds. They may not answer how they really want to answer questions because they're think they're being judged on them. Whereas a survey is more so finding out what works for you.

So we just try just the verbiage change, I think has helped a lot. And one of our very first questions on the application is like, which dog are you interested in? And if you don't know, and you want us to help you find the right match, put, matching me to a dog. We had some of our best matches that way, because then it takes off stereotyping based on looks. So everyone thinks, "I want like a great pittie with cropped ears," or something like that. You get this idea in your mind of what you think you want. And then you might show up in an adoption show and be like, "Oh my God, the black, older pit bull sitting in the corner is my soulmate."

You just have to break down those barriers and see what works in your house. Do you want one of our lazy potato couch pitties or do you want an active hiker pittie? So we just try to do what's best for everybody involved, including the people and the dogs.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Right. Because your dog. Sometimes people might be applying for one dog and you might be like, "You know what, you guys are perfect for this dog." Then do you suggest that in and say, "Are you willing to meet that and try this dog?"

Stephanie Paluch:

Absolutely. The number one application we get, I should say, the number one survey we get is for puppies. And we just had someone apply for a puppy and it looks like they actually work full-time jobs and stuff. And so we're like, "Puppy might be a little hard." We won't say no to that because people are welcome to adoptive puppy even if they work full time, but we did say, "Hey we looked at your application, you have kids, you have another dog. We really think that this other dog might be the fit for you." And we send them a really cute video of the dogs showing their personality. And all of a sudden that application, it goes, "Oh my God, I want that dog. I don't need a puppy. I want that personality right there."

Jacqueline Pinol:

Aw, that's so cool. Let me ask you this, because I know that I've helped in my city or I've helped rescues in Georgia where I got my own dogs from, I got four pitties from Georgia. And even after people check out well on paper, because I've volunteered to help run adoption applications, as the other rescues do call them. And sometimes people check out on paper, they check out on a home visit, everything's great. And then you get a phone call a few months later, sometimes a year later. I adopted one that was a pittie that was adopted as a puppy, she was returned at one-year-old, and the rescue was like, "Oh my gosh, we have nowhere for this dog to go."

So I'm like, I'll foster. She's mine now. But do you get families that, I don't know, for better, for worse, they disappoint you, they let you down, they let the dog down, things happen?

Stephanie Paluch:

Yeah. The stories I could tell this year alone. Last year was a challenging year with a pandemic, everybody was home, everybody wanted to adopt. We had one of our best lifesaving years ever because we basically emptied the shelter. We got 68 adult pit bulls out in a matter of like a month and a half, I think, which was amazing. And that's just our rescue alone, not including the other rescues. The problem was that everybody was home, structure was out the window, so crating wasn't happening, people were bored at home. So the dogs had way too much going on for themselves.

They were constantly going on hikes, constantly doing toys and games. And it became a lot for some dogs, and we saw starting in January of this year, we started getting a lot of returns. Normally, I don't think we've ever exceeded 10 returns in a year, but this year I think we're already past 10. And it's been some challenging situations. We adopted out a seven-month-old puppy who was perfect at the beginning of the pandemic, he's a mess right now.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh gosh, that bums me out. And I do hear that.

Stephanie Paluch:

He was left outside unattended. Once they started going back to work, a lot of people just expect the dogs to know, "Oh, hey, we're going back to work now," but they didn't set them up for it. And at the same time, it was hard to work with trainers because they couldn't do in-person. So everything was Zoom related. So everybody says on their application, "I'm going to take the dog for a five mile hike every single day," but that's not reality.

So we do our best to place based on the words, but the best information we get from people is that the home visit when they see the dog in their home and we ask them, "Where are you going to put their crate? What are you going to do at night if the dog barks?" And you start asking those questions to get their wheels turning in their head, and then you can see what their responses are. I have to say the best people are just honest in their responses. They can just say, "I don't know. What do you think I should do?"

And that's the best. We love when people say, "What do you think?" Because we're here to help, we're here to support. It's the people that they disappear and they think that they're a dog trainer type thing and it happens all the time. And it shouldn't be a negative thing, but it sucks when the dog has to come back because being a foster-based rescue, we don't have places for these dogs to go, especially if they develop behavioral issues over that time.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Of course. Because I'm sure then when they come back as was the case with the one I adopted or fostered first, it was an overnight. The woman's like, "We're getting a divorce, I cannot take this dog with me to my mom's. You have to come get her now." And it's like, "Now? Where are we going to put her?" Do you know what I mean? So it's tough, people don't set the dogs up for success, but they want what they want right away.

Stephanie Paluch:

And we have quite a few experienced fosters that can separate and crate and rotate, do all of that. So we have the people who can do that stuff. It's when we adopt a dog, friendly dog, and then all of a sudden they've had fights with so many dogs and that time they come back and they have to be the only dog, but we do have some pretty good connections with trainers out here who some of them will take the dog for like a week as a decompression for us. So we can truly evaluate the dog's behavior in that time and then find the right foster for them.

The problem is always not having enough fosters. Honestly, I'd say the biggest thing we're working on now is finding more foster homes just for those types of situations, because we don't want to turn away any single dog. And if we've adopted that dog out, that dog is Players for Pits dog for life. So we're going to do everything to take that dog back too.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Yeah. I have also worked with families who come to the rescue and they go, "He's had four fights, three injuries." And it's like, I wish people would feel safe or confident enough to call the rescue after the first incident and not wait for that to accumulate, because it's harder to correct. And I've seen it happen.

Stephanie Paluch:

If the rescue that people are working with offer support, use it, contact them, let them help because it is the easiest way to get through situations and to make sure they don't keep happening.

Jacqueline Pinol:

You need fosters, and what would you say is the most support that you could get or ask for from out of state supporters, people who can't be boots on the ground with you and support you in the foster way, what else could Players for Pits use?

Stephanie Paluch:

I really like to use the word advocate. We have a really nice merchant store on our website, which also means donation. So when you buy something from our merchandise store, you're supporting the rescue by helping us fund more dogs. But then you're also getting that apparel with a nice little pittie face on it. And you can wear that around. It starts some good conversations and it gets pit bulls out there in a positive light, instead of seeing negative headlines, you're seeing positive t-shirts.

So I always say, if you're out of state and we can't adopt to, if you want to support us monetarily, that's great. If you can't, share our posts, share our stories and help us reach other people, but also just look at your local animal control and help the pit bulls out there. Every animal control has them. So there's no shortage.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And you do not adopt outside of Chicago or is it outside of Illinois?

Stephanie Paluch:

We've expanded over the last couple of years. We generally say like a 50 mile radius from Schaumburg, which is our home base, but we also have fosters up in Northern Illinois who adopt out to Wisconsin. We have fosters who in Chicago, honestly, Indiana is closer to them than the suburbs. And then I don't think we can really do Iowa. It's like five hours away, and we do want to put value into our fosters time that they spend, they already give up so much of their life to take in foster animals that asking them to drive five hours one way is a lot.

And a lot of people will say, "Oh, well, you can just skip the home visit." But honestly, we do service with our adopters and we ask them like, "What was your favorite part?" And they go, "The home visit. Seeing the dog in my house, made it real for me and made me not afraid to adopt. I saw the interactions in home and it made me more comfortable." So that's not something we're willing to cut out just yet. I know a lot of rescues don't do home visits, and that's definitely their prerogative and their issue, but they might also have shelters for dogs to come back to if it doesn't work out, whereas we have our fosters only.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, I love home visits. I think it's huge. Plus, have you ever had adopters like first-time adopters that then have come back either to adopt a second time or have fostered for you?

Stephanie Paluch:

All the time. We have so many adopters that have adopted twice, three times, some even four times from us. If a dog passes away and they're like, "All right, well, I'm going to adopt another Players for Pits dog stops type thing. We also get a ton of fosters from adopters. If they have a puppy and they don't have other dogs, it's a great way to keep their puppy to socialize if they want to foster, but they don't want a lifetime commitment of two dogs. So in the end of thing, some of our best fosters too, because they're already advocates from adopting, so they already get the rules.

Stephanie Paluch:

We are very strong on decompression, so we require a two-week decompression for all fosters, even puppies, just so that they're not pushed too quickly. And so our adopters hear the same spiel. And so they're already used to it, so then when they're ready to foster, they already know what they're signing up for.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Super cool. I really love that. That's like setting your team up for success basically. So I really love it. And I love that you mentioned the merchandise also because we have a lot of baseball fans that are listening to the podcast that you guys can go get yourself some cool t-shirts that have both baseball-type logos that are related to saving pit bulls at Players for Pits. So definitely check out their website. Stephanie, tell us where our listeners can find and follow Players for Pits.

Stephanie Paluch:

My favorite place is Facebook. I know it's like everyone's going to the TikTok stages and we're working on that. But Facebook is just [facebook.com/playersforpits](https://www.facebook.com/playersforpits). Our Instagram is great too, just search @playersforpits on there. And it's always F-O-R, not the number four. But also our website, which is just www.playersforpits.com. You'll see our tabs at the very top. It's super easy to navigate on there too. You'll see our store on the right hand side, which is really easy, but Facebook is super interactive.

We honestly get our most donations from Facebook, which is really nice because now there's no fees charged when you donate on Facebook, which is fantastic. It's been a game changer for us, honestly.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's really cool, for people to know that when I donate \$20 to you, you're getting \$20.

Stephanie Paluch:

Right. Because we used to just be in the PayPal world where every single PayPal, you'd have fees taken out. And I know they're minimal, but they really do add up. So three to 5% on every transaction, that can be going to a dog versus paying a fee.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Right. It is safe to make donations via Facebook and Instagram since now Facebook bought Instagram, so there you go. I will have all those live links in the show notes so anyone can find and follow Players for Pits very easily. Our listeners should also know that I am not getting paid to advocate for any one person or organization on this podcast. I choose to interview guests from organizations that I know are doing the good work for dogs and for people across America. Players for Pits has the canine condition seal of approval from me.

Thank you, Stephanie, for your time and this lovely educational chat on one of our absolute favorite breeds.

Stephanie Paluch:

Of course. Thank you so much for having me.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Yes. And go Players for Pits. We are going to get you more support and more fans.

Stephanie Paluch:

Thank you so much.

Jacqueline Pinol:

To all of us parents and companions of pit bull type dogs, we must be their biggest advocates. And what an honor that is. We get to love them, protect them and show them off as the good natured, lovable beings they are. When they need training like all dog breeds, do seek out safe and well-researched and recommended dog trainers, so you are set up for success. And let's wear our Don't Bully My Breed t-shirts, hats and other merchandise proudly. You will see how it strikes up conversation and an opportunity for you to shed light and positivity about your wonderful pit bull type dog.

Jacqueline Pinol:

If you don't know where to get any merchandise, like Stephanie said, visit playersforpits.com and start there. Your purchase with PFP will also count as a tax deductible donation to help a rescue dog in need. Thank you for joining me on this episode, please subscribe to our podcast, and tell your dog loving friends about it. Until next time, hang onto those leashes. The Canine Condition. Come, sit, stay.