

My “Pit bull” experience – A dog is a dog

By Jessica Martin – Director, Healthy Pets Project of NYC, Inc.

If you are the proud parent of a “pit bull” type dog, I am certain you have encountered people on the streets who might have commented “Is that a pit bull?” or “wow, your pit bull is really well behaved” and even “does he/she bite?” From personal experience, I am sure you have felt a little put off by such comments. I mean, why would that person assume my dog bites?? Or assume that my dog is not trainable?? And yes, sometimes I actually say to myself “what?”...

It is important to remember that what most people know about pit bulls comes from what they SEE on the news or the stories they READ in the newspapers. Most pay attention to the exaggerated and scandalized versions of what might have happened in a town involving a pit bull. As much as we don’t want our furry friend to be judged...let’s not do it to others! How does the saying go? “Turn them around with kindness?”

If you ever feel that you would like to say something about your fabulous pit bull dog, I suggest you acknowledge what people say (comments like “I hear you or I could see that” go a long way), but most importantly talk about the WONDERFUL qualities of YOUR DOG. How he/she may have wonderful leash manners, or how he loves to meet new people! Or simply, how pit bull dogs are one of the most popular breeds of dogs that people like to adopt at the moment.

Some people may not like them, or they may be scared of them because of something that happened to them in their past; and that is absolutely understandable. Or they might have heard a news report where the talk was quite negative about pit bull type dogs. I usually make the point to say that I feel bad they had such a bad experience. Then I usually make my boy lay down, as to make that person more comfortable. It may seem like something so minimal, but the conversation always ends with “wow, your dog is sure a nice dog, maybe next time I will pet him”; that to me is a win-win situation!

I remember one day I was walking my boy in the neighborhood and a group of three girls (2 teenagers and a 20 something) began walking away screaming (yes, screaming) saying that my dog was so big and scary. I told him that he is a friendly dog and that I would ask him to sit so that they didn’t feel “threatened”. They oooh and aaah at the fact that I did it with signs, and how he sat nicely, waiting for my release. One girl asked if she could pet him, I said “Sure!” Well, to make the story short, all four of us ended up on a bench, with my boy sitting by their legs, getting chin rubs, belly rubs and kisses. They see him sometimes and call for him. SO CUTE!

Yes, I used that time to talk about how all dogs are different just like people, and how it is so important to treat them as individuals; each dog with his/her qualities, colors, dislikes and likes!! Basically, treat a dog as you would or we should a “human being”.

I always tell children to always ask an owner if they can pet their dog, any type/breed of dog. They asked why he is neutered, so I talked about the benefits of spay and neuter. It was rewarding to me...but the one that benefited the most was my BOY! He has so many new friends!

It is such a great thing to see in my neighborhood, that more and more families are adopting pit bulls- from your blue nose handsome boy next door, to a new brindle boy in my building, to Ms. pocket pittie two blocks away! So many of the stereotypes are being proven wrong every day! Sometimes, all you have to do is let your dog do the “smiling”...they do have a way to change people’s ideas that way.

I think that as dog owners we are and can make such a difference on how others perceive our dogs. It doesn’t have to be complicated, and it doesn’t have to be a major dissertation! It can be by just answering a question simply and being POSITIVE.

All dogs are individuals, and they all need to learn manners and need guidance from their parents...kind of like children!

People love to see a happy dog... and a happy owner. And that sometimes is enough for people to look beyond the “pit bull” look and all those negative stereotypes that are associated with it. They will just see a happy well mannered dog... who happens to be a “pit bull” dog.