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Oakland Tribune, The (CA)

East Bay youths learn compassion by caring for dogs

November 27, 2009

Section: My Town

Cassie Harwood Oakland Tribune

Tongues were wagging, tails were thumping and there was hardly a dry eye in the room Nov. 20 during the East Bay SPCA's graduation ceremony for students of the animal welfare organization's TLC program. TLC, short for "Teaching Love and Compassion," is designed for children living in high-crime areas, and aims to raise their self-esteem, patience and compassion for living creatures through work with shelter dogs.

During the six-week program, 12 eighth-graders from Oakland's Lighthouse Community Charter School spent two hours after each school day training and caring for SPCA dogs and learning about anger management, dog grooming, the importance of spaying and neutering pets, and other topics.

On Nov. 20, the students gathered at the charter school, along with classmates, parents and educators, to read poetry about their dogs and to show off tricks they had taught their pooches through positive reinforcement by way of treats. Altogether, seven dogs, each with its own shelter story, health issues and breed — or in most cases, mix — were trained by one to two students each.

During the one-hour ceremony, the dogs, clad in decorative scarves, sat obediently at the feet of their young trainers, who met the dogs' occasional yelps and barks with treats pulled from zippered pouches.

Frasier, a feisty black Pomeranian, panted loudly throughout the event, while Juliet, a nervous Chihuahua, at one point bolted for the door. One dog, Toa, who recently underwent surgery, sat more stoically, somewhat immobilized by a neck cone.

Each student bonded with their assigned shelter dog, a fact made clear by the emotion-tinged poems they read. A few students burst into tears mid-sentence, prompting more wet eyes from the crowd. Six weeks ago, none of the dogs had been adopted. Today at least three have found homes, and students had a hard time saying goodbye to their newfound canine companions.

Flavio Martinez, 13, worked with Peluchin, a poodle mix who has already been adopted. Flavio said the TLC program made him think differently about how to treat animals.

"I thought it was cool," he said. "And like, I think we really made a difference in the dogs' lives, because we were helping them out."

Tony Cuevas, associate director of the school, said the TLC program is one of

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the best educational programs he's ever worked with.

"And I've worked with a lot of programs," Cuevas said. "It inspired and motivated the kids to get their homework done and get their behavior together."

To participate, students had to maintain at least a C grade-point-average.

"But aside from that, the program itself brought out something special from the students," he said. "Usually you don't see something like that at a middle school."

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