

THE DOG WHISPERER

Branford's Michelle McAdam shares her secrets in canine communication

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It was an incident that made national news last month.

On a glistening Sunday afternoon, a pit bull broke free from his owner's Branford home and viciously mauled a 93-year-old woman who was out for a walk. The woman underwent surgery for massive trauma to her lower left leg. The dog, Booker, was quarantined.

Though renowned in Shoreline veterinary circles, animal shelters, and among canine owners as the "dog whisperer" for her sixth-sense ability to understand and "gentle" ill-mannered, un-house-trained, and otherwise unruly dogs, professional dog trainer Michelle McAdam doesn't pretend to know what triggered the attack.

"I want everyone to experience the healing power and unconditional love you get from a dog. ... You need to invest time on basic training and socialization."

—Michelle McAdam



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For Michelle McAdam, shown here with Trixie and Branford's Kathy Kessler, it's more than just treats for good behavior, it's becoming a benevolent master.

Maybe Booker construed the woman's cane as threatening. Maybe he read her body language as projecting fear.

Aside from a report of the dog being abandoned in North Branford before ending up at the Dan Cosgrove Animal Shelter six months prior to his October 2013 adoption, there's a paucity of information on Booker's history. Which makes it a case of "idiopathic aggression," said the slim, energetic

57-year-old on a recent lunch hour while waiting for a client across from the Branford Green.

In other words, "it's a total unknown why he did what he did."

That explains the reluctance of McAdam, who's worked with dogs for over two decades, to claim she could have prevented the assault. Or, for that matter, to assign blame to Booker's current owners — or anyone else involved.

That said, the straight-talk-

ing New York native got into the dog training business not just because she has a natural gift. Without her two golden retrievers, she's not sure she would have endured a bout with cancer, a series of failed in vitro fertilizations, and multiple sclerosis.

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said as Trixie, an adolescent Bichon Frise, and her owner, Branford's Kathy Kessler, arrived for their appointment. To get to that point, though, "you need to invest time on basic training and socialization."

That's why McAdam makes it a practice to bring her canine clients to the center of town at the busiest hours, cajoling them in and out of Trailblazer and Common Grounds and across the street to the Green: she subscribes to animal behaviorist Dr. Ian Dunbar's notion that puppies within their first few months need as much exposure to the unfamiliar as possible. The more commotion — children skittering past, the rev of a motorcycle engine, the sharp bark of another dog — the better.

It's not only dogs that need training, according to McAdam. The species is ingrained with a pack



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mentality, with a dominant leader in each pack. For that reason, it's incumbent on the human member of the pack to assume what the longtime Branford resident termed a "strong, benevolent leadership role," as she held out a treat to Trixie near a bench on the Green and waited for her to stop sniffing an Ashley's ice cream wrapper and meet the trainer's eyes.

Teaching a dog to main-

tain eye contact "reinforces the human as leader, particularly if that dog wants to be in charge," McAdam said. "She can't focus on me while she's barking or lunging at anything else. She's so busy staring into my eyes for that treat she has no idea what's going on around her."

Likewise, conditioning Trixie to sit and lie down on command ensures she'll wait at a traffic light and abstain

from jumping on visitors at her home, while further establishing the owner as the leader in the relationship, she added.

Not that Trixie needed much training. "She's a lucky dog" by both nature and nurture, said McAdam, echoing the American Kennel Club characterization of the Bichon Frise as "merry" and "cheerful." Not to mention "she's spent her life in a lively household with children and on a street with familiar neighbors and dogs."

Unlike Booker, that is. To McAdam's mind, the April attack was tragic for all concerned — the dog, its owner and, above all, the elderly woman.

"All I can do is keep doing what I do and try to stop it from happening again," she said, sighing, as Trixie obediently toddled alongside her owner across Main Street and headed off into the afternoon.

For more information on the Dog Whisperer, visit www.michdogtrainer.com or call 203-481-4508.