

SHELBY HAS IT ALL SORTED OUT

BY CASEY KELLY BARTON

SHELBY, A CALM AND CAPABLE black-and-white Australian Shepherd with one blue eye and one brown, is sorting recyclable trash under the riveted gaze of a dozen elementary school pupils. The children murmur in amazement as the 6-year-old dog puts cans into one bin and milk jugs into another.

Then AmeriCorps volunteer Vanessa Balli discusses the reasons for recycling and avoiding items with wasteful packaging, even in a small community like theirs—Inez, Texas, population 1,400, situated on the Gulf Coast plain.

Ordinarily, a group of kids wouldn't sit still for a talk on solid-waste disposal, but these soak it all in. Toward the end of the talk, a boy raises his hand. "What kind of dog is that?" he asks. "How did you teach her to do that?" Balli smiles; she's glad he asked

because Shelby, recycling spokesdog, was once herself cast aside, then reclaimed by someone who saw her potential.

Balli, a 29-year-old psychology undergraduate and dog trainer, first saw Shelby five years ago wandering in a lot in her hometown of Victoria, between Houston and Corpus Christi. She took the dog home and ran "found" ads in the paper but received no answers. Balli read the reason in Shelby's scars, speculating she came from a sheep farm.

"I think she didn't work out, and they cattle-prodded her and dumped her," she said. "She was a real nice dog, but she was severely abused. When men would come around, she would have what we call submissive peeing."

Balli, who had trained 20 disability-assistance dogs, gradually won Shelby's trust. She took special care that the posi-



COURTESY VANESSA BALLI/AUSTRALIAN SHEPHERD

Shelby teaches recycling by sorting paper, plastic and aluminum.

tion of her hands didn't threaten the dog. She gave Shelby praise and treats when she performed correctly, plus lots of attention and understanding.

"Getting a dog is just like bringing in an adopted child," Balli said. "You have to spend time with them."

It took about six months to teach Shelby to sit on command. Once the bond between them started to grow, Balli trained Shelby as an assistance dog and they started going to fun matches, obedience competitions in which no points are recorded. To add to the fun, Balli gave the dog a championlike name on which to hang her Companion Dog and Canine Good Citizen titles: Shelby's Locutus of Borg, after the character Shelby in the film *Steel Magnolias* and a reference from *Star Trek*.

"I've watched the bond between her and Shelby develop," said Gary Moses, recreation superintendent for the Victoria Parks and Recreation Department. "They are wonderful to see together. They're always doing something positive for the community."

When she joined national service group AmeriCorps in January 1996, Balli "wanted to do something fun with kids and to have the dog learn how to communicate with the kids."

Shelby took to the idea. She learned to sort paper, plastic and aluminum by feel and with Balli now puts in 12 to 14 hours a month—more during the school year—presenting recycling programs. Balli estimated she and Shelby take their environmental message to about 800 children each month in the Victoria area. They also present their show at summer camps, the local recycling center and other venues.

Benny Ortiz, who oversees Victoria's recycling center, credits Shelby and Balli with getting more people to use the center. Besides their day-to-day work, Shelby is a big draw at the center's recycling celebration in August, Ortiz said, generating lots of good publicity and visits from children who come to see her and leave eager to recycle. "The kids' faces are like 'Wow!' when she grabs a can," he said. "There's a tremendous response, and they get really excited."

Watching Shelby at work, you find it hard to believe that as a puppy she wandered the streets scarred and unwanted. But now Shelby is a busy local celebrity and hardworking volunteer with her own AmeriCorps uniform and a time sheet for her service hours.

No, Shelby doesn't sort the trash at home. In her off-hours, she is an

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audience. She'll go into a crowd and fetch stuff and bring it back, and it doesn't bother her. The kids feel comfortable around that. I can see her in the crowd having fun, and she tries to get everybody involved." 🐾

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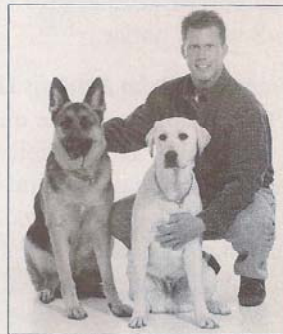
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