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Local dog trainer Annie Phenix stands with her border collies, Echo and Radar, at her house near Ignacio. Phenix specializes in reactive and aggressive dogs, most of whom act out because of fear./Photo by Jennaye Derge.

Hope for the 'midnight dog walkers'

Trainer and author Annie Phenix helps troubled dogs and their handlers

by Jen Reeder

When Judy Kolz was living in Grand Junction, she used to drive several miles out of town and into the desert to walk her dog, Gracie. But they didn't make the daily trips for the scenery – the little border terrier would turn into a barking and lunging “whirling dervish” whenever she saw another dog approaching. So Kolz had to walk her where they had less chance of encountering other

dogs. Classes with a trainer who suggested jerking on Gracie's leash when she acted out only made matters worse.

“It was heartbreaking,” Kolz recalled. “I was just about ready to give up.”

Fortunately, she learned of Durango dog trainer Annie Phenix, CPDT-KA (which stands for “Certified Professional Dog Trainer Knowledge Assessed”), who specializes in working with reactive and aggressive dogs through her business Phenix Dogs. Kolz's husband is from Durango, so they took their dog to work with Phenix – who quickly discovered Gracie was reacting negatively to other dogs due to fear, not inherent aggression. Phenix helped Gracie overcome her fear by teaching her to associate seeing another dog with getting tasty chicken.

“Gracie was getting chicken and I was getting manna from heaven,” Kolz said. “It was just wonderful to see her around another dog and not reacting.”

After private lessons and attending Phenix's “Growly Dog” class, Gracie made such a remarkable transformation that her nickname became “Amazing Gracie.” Now she is an American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen and competes in agility with other off-leash dogs. Instead of taking isolated walks, Kolz and Gracie hike with canine and human friends.

Naturally, Kolz is thrilled.



Radar awaits a treat. Phenix believes in using positive reinforcement to turn negative experiences into good ones./Photo by Jennaye Derge

“Annie is thoughtful in every sense of the word, and by that I mean brilliant and kind,” Kolz said. “I’m just terribly grateful to her for the difference that she made in Gracie’s life and my life and for the bonding she helped us find.”

Amazing Gracie is one of thousands of dogs Phenix has helped over the past 15 years. And now the accomplished trainer and popular “Dogster” columnist is expanding her reach with the publication of her new book, *The Midnight Dog Walkers: Positive Training and Practical Advice for Living With a Reactive or Aggressive Dog*.

The book reflects the deep understanding Phenix has of dogs, as well as her love of the species – in fact, the book’s dedication describes the comfort her dog Cricket provided in a sometimes tumultuous childhood home. *The Midnight Dog Walkers* is a departure from more typical training manuals that tend to be on the dry side; Phenix peppered the color-photo book with vivid anecdotes of clients and their dogs – most of them from the Durango area – who have had to walk their pets at midnight or other times when they can avoid other dogs.

Phenix also shares personal experiences to show she can relate to her clients. One riveting chapter describes the reactive Rottweiler she got as a college student with three jobs – and little time to train a dog with behavior issues like biting other people.

“Wylie broke my pinkie and gave me a concussion, but he also literally saved my life twice,” Phenix said.

After Wylie prevented two assaults, Phenix became convinced that troubled dogs are worth saving. She began volunteering at an animal shelter in Texas, and she and her husband fostered over 400 dogs. When the “onslaught” of dogs dropped at the shelter became overwhelming, Phenix resolved to combat the problem by becoming a dog trainer.

“I became a trainer thinking, ‘I can give people a resource ... If I can find those owners who will stick by their dog and learn how to fix (a behavior issue), then hopefully there won’t be as many dumped,’” she said.

Phenix became an expert in training dogs with force-free methods. Because fear and frustration lead to reactivity in dogs, Phenix is a staunch advocate for positive training methods. When she meets new clients, she collects their prong collar and replaces it with a “freedom harness.”

“Shock collars, choke chains – it’s just so unnecessary to use force,” Phenix said. “That’s another reason I wrote the book: so people will know good training from harmful training. This whole dominance thing has got to go.”

Instead, Phenix uses methods like teaching incompatible behaviors. For example, if a dog wants to jump up on someone, the handler commands them to sit. If they want to bark, they are told to lie down, since dogs don’t usually bark in that position.

“And you can’t be really fearful and play. It’s really hard,” Phenix said. “So that’s the goal of our Growly Dog class: to get them playing next to each other.”

But as she acknowledges in her book, some dogs have such insurmountable issues that they must be put down, which is always upsetting. Other times, strangers will leave phone messages threatening to euthanize their aggressive dog if she doesn’t call them back immediately. There are undeniably depressing aspects of her work, so Phenix draws inspiration from her clients.

“That’s what’s kept me in the game: these incredible clients, many here, who have become very, very good friends of mine because they absolutely won’t give up on the dog.”

If you have a troubled dog

Dogs can act out if they are fearful of touch or other dogs. For this reason, Annie Phenix, CPDT-KA, urges prevention by only hiring a reputable breeder (if you choose to buy a dog instead of adopting one), and socializing puppies as much as possible (hold them, and let them play with other dogs and people).

If your dog displays signs of aggression, don’t wait to address the situation. First, check with your veterinarian to see if the behavior has an underlying medical cause. You might also consider working with a veterinary behaviorist and giving your dog anti-anxiety medications if need be, she said.

Most importantly, if you hire a trainer, make sure they use force-free methods.

“Aggression begets aggression,” Phenix said.

Bayfield resident Kat Katsos said Phenix is not just the trainer of her German shepherd, Lola – she’s such a trusted advisor that she is now the dog’s godmother. Lola became reactive to other dogs after being attacked by three different dogs before she was 6 months old. Each time, Lola was walking on a leash in her neighborhood and was attacked by an unleashed dog. She became so afraid of other dogs that she barks in terror if she sees one approaching, and if the dog draws too close, she will attack in perceived self-defense.

“She cannot see other dogs without losing her mind,” Katsos said. “It isn’t that she’s an aggressive dog, it’s that she’s so fearful of what other dogs will do to her.”

While Lola has made advances thanks to Phenix, it has been a painstaking process. Like Phenix, Katsos fervently believes dog owners should obey leash laws. She is frustrated when she sees people walking with off-leash dogs in downtown Durango. Sometimes they even wave off her warnings to keep her distance and call, “It’s OK – he’s friendly!”

“People need to be responsible for their dogs. They need to understand that my dog doesn’t want to fight your dog, she’s just scared to death of your dog. My dog could easily harm another dog, but only because she’s so fearful for her life,” Katsos said. “I’m going to do everything I can to keep that critical distance between my dog and your dog, but I can’t control it if you don’t control your dog.”

She hopes anyone who needs advice, guidance or deeper understanding of their dog will read Phenix’s book.

“Annie did a beautiful job on Midnight Dog Walkers. It’s an exceptional book and it’s written with a wealth of knowledge and advice,” Katsos said. “Annie is amazing.”

For more information, visit www.phenixdogs.com.