

## OUR TOWN

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### Life's Ruff

By Sarah Terez-Rosenblum on January 13, 2012 2:40 PM | No Comments | No TrackBacks



All photos by Sheri Berliner

Animal trainer Chris Dignan has one mission: to raise awareness about the plight of homeless dogs. A former dolphin trainer at the Shedd Aquarium, Dignan is now the President and Director of Training for The Dog Saving Network (DSN), an organization which highlights the benefits of positive reinforcement training. Our Town spoke with Dignan about training tips, his dog talent show, *Life's Ruff*, and all things canine.

**Our Town** What drew you to animal training?

**Chris Dignan** You will have to ask my mom! As far back as I can remember I have been interested in animals; dinosaurs, whales and dolphins peaked my interest. There isn't a huge demand for dino trainers these days so whales and dolphins it was!

**OT** Describe your methods.

**CD** I'm a positive reinforcement trainer. I reward behavior that I like so the dog does it again or train a dog to do what I need him to. Like most trainers, I break a complex behavior into a series of smaller steps and systematically work towards the finished behavior. By using these small steps or approximations, you can teach a dog to do whatever it is physically capable of and it stays fun for the dog throughout!

**OT** What inspired *Life's Ruff*?

**CD** We had a dog show [at the Shedd Aquarium] for a while about training pets using the same techniques that are used to train marine mammals. Tons of people would come up and ask if they could adopt one of the dogs in the show. The plan was to adopt out the dogs after the show was over so I had to tell people "not now" or "check back in a few months." I never liked that answer so I started thinking of ways that shows could be used to raise awareness for homeless animals while highlighting the importance of training [but also] as adoption events. I want people to understand that anyone can train their dogs as long as they are committed to the process. *Life's Ruff* is the first of many new and different shows we hope to produce that can be used to super-charge adoptions while inspiring people to train.



**OT** You hope to use your Dog Saving Network to change the way the country views shelter and rescue dogs and looks to provide an easy to follow alternative to some of the more popular, aversive training methods in use today. Can you expand on this a bit?

**CD** I hope to show people what homeless dogs CAN do, when given the chance, instead of focusing on their challenges. There are so many dogs that need homes right now and we, as a country, need to shift our mindset towards making adoption the first choice when looking for a dog. One of the hardest things for me to see is a dog misbehaving and an owner using the excuse of "he's a rescue" or "he's a shelter dog." Yes, dogs that come from the shelter or rescue system can have behavioral problems but that can be true of any dog, regardless of their previous living arrangements. I want people to be proud of their adopted animals and understand that being a good dog owner requires work, not excuses. Every dog that comes from a shelter or rescue has a chance to become a messenger for all shelter and rescued animals. It's up to the owners to make that happen.

**OT** Can you talk a little about Show Dog U?

**CD** Show Dog U is a training group that teaches members, first and foremost to be good trainers and make good training decisions. We also teach dogs to do a bunch of tricks and we then use those tricks in shows or videos to help raise awareness for homeless animals in a creative way. For me, the true power of the group is these are just regular people who care about their dogs, want to learn about training and want to do something to help out homeless animals. I'm very proud of all of the members of the group and I truly admire the hard work and dedication they have all put forth as we build our little start-up!



**OT** What would you say to someone with his heart set on a purebred?

**CD** I do appreciate the fact that people are looking for a certain breed but just about any breed can be found in the shelter or rescue system, you just have to look. With otherwise healthy dogs being put down at an alarming rate, I hope people make adoption their first choice and encourage others to do so as well.

**OT** What's your greatest canine success story?

**CD** The next one. There is so much work to be done so I measure success in the moment then move forward.

Check Dignan's dogs out for yourself at "Life's Ruff," 2 p.m. January 22 at Gorilla Tango Theatre.

A writer with an MFA in Creative Writing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Sarah Terez Rosenblum freelances for a number of web sites and print publications. Her debut novel, "Herself When She's Missing," (Soft Skull press) is available for pre-order here. She is also a figure model, spinning instructor and teacher at Chicago's StoryStudio. Inevitably one day she will find herself lecturing naked on a spinning bike. She's kind of looking forward to it actually.

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