



## **The Star-Ledger**

### **Prison-raised pup is partner in fighting crime**

By Matthew J. Dowling, Star-Ledger Staff  
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Shakirah Jackson beamed like a proud parent as one of the newest members of the New York City Police Department's Bomb Squad bounded across the lawn and showered her with sloppy, wet kisses.

Sheeba, a yellow Labrador who just completed the NYPD explosives detection training, spent nine months at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Hunterdon County under Jackson's care as part of the Puppies Behind Bars program. The two hadn't seen each other since January, and it showed yesterday on the lawn outside the prison's A Cottage.

"She was my sweetie," said Jackson, 31, of East Orange, who is already training another dog at the prison. "I was very excited and couldn't wait to see her. I am very proud of her."

The visit yesterday by Sheeba and her new handler from the NYPD Bomb Squad, officer Paul Perricone, served as a reunion for Sheeba and Jackson. It also marked the start of a new partnership between the police department and the Puppies Behind Bars program, which was initially founded to help train guide dogs for the blind.

"Since Sept. 11, there's this huge need for bomb-sniffing dogs," said Gloria Gilbert Stoga, who started the program in two New York prisons and expanded it to the Edna Mahan facility in Union Township last year.

Sheeba was among the first group of five dogs brought to the prison for obedience training by the inmates. The initial training of the specially bred dogs helps determine if they would be good candidates for the extensive guide dog program provided by the Guiding Eyes for the Blind in New York. Three of the dogs, including Sheeba's brothers, Alex and Henry, passed the screening.

In the past, those that failed to meet the strict temperament and confidence requirements -- as Sheeba did -- were adopted out to families. Now, they're going to be screened a second time by the NYPD bomb squad for possible entry in the explosive detection unit.

Duke, the fifth dog from the initial group trained by the inmates also failed to make the cut as a Seeing Eye dog. He was evaluated yesterday at the prison by NYPD Detective Kenneth Silva, who trains the animals to detect explosives.

"Hopefully, today I'll get another couple of candidates out of here," Silva said. "It makes my job easier. I know they've all been socialized, and they're not aggressive in any way."



The bomb squad has increased its K-9 unit from eight to 13 dogs since Sept. 11, and Silva said the goal is to add at least two more by the end of the year to handle the growing demand for bomb detection during this period of heightened terrorism concerns.

In addition to Duke, Silva said he would screen two other dogs trained through the Puppies Behind Bars program, one from Edna Mahan and another from one of the New York prisons.

"We're really excited about it," Stoga said of the new interest from the bomb squad. "We're really thrilled to be able to help in this way."

As a result of the new partnership, Stoga said the Puppies Behind Bars program has started buying dogs exclusively to be trained as explosive-sniffing dogs, including two already receiving obedience training at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility.

Perricone said Sheeba's transition to bomb detection has been a huge success. He said Sheeba has already been out on several assignments and would likely be sniffing for explosives at several major upcoming events, such as the U.S. Open, a United Nations summit and the baseball playoffs.

"Shakirah did an absolute fantastic job," Perricone said of Sheeba's training. "Having all the obedience work done before I got her was incredible."

Perricone's visit with Sheeba yesterday also gave Jackson, who will be paroled to a halfway house in the next few weeks after serving a 10-year term, a chance to share her extensive scrap book of Sheeba's puppy pictures. The binder even included Sheeba's first baby tooth and a catalog of her major training milestones.

"Obviously, Shakirah is madly in love with this dog," Perricone said after Jackson presented him with a blanket, coat and mat she knitted for Sheeba. "She behaves perfectly. She's great with other people and with other dogs."

To volunteer or find out more information about the program, contact the Puppies Behind Bars program by calling (212) 924-7404 or online at [www.puppiesbehindbars.com](http://www.puppiesbehindbars.com)

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