

Tuesday August 1, 2006

NEWS

Archives
Business
Bob Dunning
Features
Weddings
Health
Local news
Obituaries

SPORTS

Local Sports
Aggies
Blue Devils
Kings
River Cats

CLASSIFIEDS

Automotive
Dial-A-Pro
Employment
Merchandise
Place an ad
Real estate

ENTERTAINMENT

Art
Books
Feature stories
Movies
Music
Theater
Travel
Video games
Wine

COLUMNISTS

C. Colton
Debbie Davis
Dick Dorf
Bob Dunning
Marion Franck
Gerald Heffernon
Richard Harris
Debra LoGuercio
Michael Mirer
Matt O'Donnell
Tanya Perez
Rich Rifkin
Elisabeth Sherwin
Wendy Weitzel
Contributors

OPINION

Letters
Local editorials
Op-ed
Submit a letter

FORMS

Anniversary
Birth
Classified ad
Engagement
Gift subscription
News tip
Obituary
Photo order
Press release
Submit a letter
Subscribe
Vacation Stop
Wedding

ABOUT US

Advertising
Hours
Internships
Maps
Meet the staff
Our history
Publicity handbook

Animal whisperer

By Dan Watson/Enterprise correspondent

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Move over Seabiscuit, "The Cat Whisperer" is in town.

Then again, she could be called "The Giraffe Whisperer." Or even "The Chicken Whisperer."

For veterinarian Sophia Yin, a Davis animal behaviorist, it doesn't matter what type of animal it is, it's trainable.

And most people who turn over their stubborn pets to Yin end up agreeing: Her methods are unique, but they work.

After graduating from veterinary school in 1993, she began to work on small animals. As she spent more time as a veterinarian, she discovered there were animal behavior problems in her patients' pets as opposed to medical ailments.

And the problem often wasn't an untrained pet. It was an untrained owner.

"Owners don't realize that every time they interact with an animal, they're teaching something good or bad," Yin said.

Yin began to take classes and craft her own method. In the back of her mind, she remembered the experience she had in her high school years with her own overly aggressive dog.

"I needed help, but I couldn't find help," Yin said. "I thought that I might have to euthanize the dog. I went through 10 trainers until I found someone. If I knew then what I know now..."

The trainers were using force in an attempt to fix her dog. But in the process, the bond she had with her pet was dying. She was convinced there was a better way.

And after years of seminars, veterinary conferences, university courses, writing an award-winning pet column for the San Francisco Chronicle and patient consults, Yin has perfected a better method.

It doesn't involve force, and she hardly needs to say a word. She makes the animal figure it out on its own.

The power of a reward

Currently, Yin teaches a Kitty Kindergarten class at the Experimental College at UC Davis. She also teaches a Puppy Preschool, lectures at UC Davis and welcomes consults with owners and their pets.

In the kitty class, cats are socialized to interact with other cats and humans and to adapt to different environments.

The best way to get animals to respond, is to reward them, Yin stresses.

"One thing that people need to realize regardless of the animal is that they behave in certain ways because those actions are rewarded," Yin said. "People need to be aware of what's getting rewarded."

Using treats as a reward, Yin is quickly able to make a cat follow a target, enjoy getting its nails clipped, sit, lie down or perform tricks. By constantly rewarding an action, Yin makes the animal figure out what it needs to do to gain a treat, a pet or some other form of reward.

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Unlike dogs, cats do not respond to force. Because of this, owners get frustrated and are more likely to shelter or euthanize them.

Josh Dorf was almost one of those owners.

[Animal whisperer](#)

His 8-year-old cat, Murry, unexpectedly began to tear apart an expensive couch. The cat also found it to be a nice pit stop. And when a veterinarian told Dorf that his cat was perfectly healthy, he began to search for a shelter. His last-ditch effort was to consult a “pet shrink.”

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[Guy talk](#)

On the first visit, Yin set up a “kitty litter buffet” - several litter boxes in a row with different scents and characteristics. Murry soon found a better alternative to the couch. He also found no reward in scratching the layer of aluminum foil that had been placed over his “toy.”

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“It was hilarious,” Dorf said. “The cat has a poo palace ... but it doesn't come near the couch anymore.”

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Relieving itself outside the litter box is the top reason for cat behavior consults, according to Yin.

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For dogs, it's a different story.

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Aggression is the biggest problem for dogs, according to Yin. And the most popular method of training is force.

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“You shouldn't use force on a dog to train them, but people are use to pushing them into a sit, or using a choke chain,” Yin said. “The animals don't know what you want, and you're yanking it around.”

[Weddings](#)

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For years, Diane Alsey struggled with trainers that used force.

[Edmonds-Wallin](#)

“A lot of dog trainers charge you a lot of money and all they do is put the collar on the neck and pin it to the ground until it is forced to be submissive. It's a fear factor,” Alsey said. “I didn't go for that.”

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Alsey's dog, Bella, suffers from a form of animal Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Bella would spin in circles with reckless abandon. Yin taught Alsey to reward Bella only when she would sit and stay. Soon she had stopped the behavior.

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[Chaump-Starkovich](#)

Even Prozac and other medication could not beat Yin's training.

[Retzer-Schwass](#)

[Horowitz-Shtein](#)

Because of the condition, Bella also often refused to sit.

[Flaherty-Ravanesi](#)

“I had been to other trainers. They would try to force me to pin the dog down. I would try and she resisted it so badly,” Alsey said. “It hurt me in my heart ... Sophia's technic is different. She lets the dog figure it out.”

[Yudin-Stone](#)

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Murry and Bella are both new and improved pets. But dogs and cats just scratch the surface.

Chickens, giraffes and more

Yin's training spans the animal kingdom.

In one video, two of her former chickens, Thelma and Louise, perform “Mary Had a Little Lamb” on a play piano, come when called, scurry up and down a ramp and clear jumps for treats.

In another, she trains a giraffe to place its hoof on a wooden block for trimming. In another, an aggressive goat learns to ignore its owner. Stallions, ostriches, rats and pigs can perform amazing feats.

And all these feats are accomplished with the power of reward.

If she advertises these triumphs enough, they may just call her “The Animal Whisperer.”

- More information on Sophia Yin and her methods can be found at www.nerdbook.com

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[HOME](#) | [NEWS](#) | [ENTERTAINMENT](#) | [SPORTS](#)

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