



Prison program prepares pups to pitch in for special needs people

Jodie Munro O'Brien

SUNSHINE wagged her tail as her Learner vest was removed and her P plate vest was adorned on her golden body.

The 15-month-old labrador was one of four dogs to be the first to graduate from the Pups in Prison program at Borallon Correctional Centre, near Ipswich, yesterday.

The program was a joint venture between Borallon prison and Assistance Dogs Australia, a non-profit organisation that trains dogs to help people with special needs.

It was the first program of its kind in Queensland held in a high security prison.

Sunshine, Logan and Cornell performed a demonstration at the prison yesterday for visiting dignitaries as part of their graduation, before they were taken to the National Training School in Sydney where they will spend the next six months undergoing advanced training before they are placed with a person with special needs. Oxley has already been placed with a family.

In their time behind the razor wire, the pups learned tasks such as picking up telephones, pulling clothing out of washing machines and putting them into a basket, retrieving mail and how to open doors and drawers.

Life prisoner Mick, 45, who has been incarcerated since 1990, said training Sunshine was a worthwhile project.

"The dogs have brought a lot of normality to the jail," he said.

"It's allowed me to see, especially with the amount of time I've been in prison, that I still have emotions. They shut down over time in here."

Mick also said he felt good about helping provide someone with an assistance dog.

"It hasn't changed my life but it has changed my perspective on those who live in a wheelchair and the frustrations they must go through," he said.

Fellow inmate Matt, 45, who has been in prison for 23 years, said training the pups had brought some light-hearted moments to prison life.

He said once the puppies learnt how to open doors, they would often open their own door and get the other dogs out to play before the handlers caught them.

The program was also designed to help provide prisoners with new levels of responsibility, self-esteem, patience and co-operation.



PRISON PALS: Borallon inmate Mick (above) gives a farewell hug to Sunshine, who is a big help with the washing (below).
 Pictures: Sarah Marshall