

# Practicing Emotional Intelligence

In our ongoing series of PPG member profiles, this month **BARKS** features *Stephanie Peters of Plucky Paws, LLC in Ames, Iowa*

**S**tephanie Peters is a professional dog trainer based in Ames, Iowa who first learned about animal-assisted therapy through her theater studies.

**Q: Can you tell us a bit more about yourself, how you first got into animal behavior and training and what you are doing now?**

**A:** I earned a BFA in acting and a minor in anthropology from the University of Utah, and went on to complete a Master's in Theater Education at Emerson College, Massachusetts. During my Master's program, I learned about a variety of therapeutic arts practices, and discovered the world of animal therapy. Suddenly, it seemed like therapy dogs were everywhere—I saw a fluffy little dog entering Boston Children's Hospital, his owner carrying a hula-hoop, and a big friendly golden retriever relaxing on the floor at the Boston Public Library as children read him stories. My senior dog Scout was approaching 19 years of age, and I decided that when she passed I would train to become a therapy dog team with my next dog. As soon as I began visitation with my next dog, Marmalade, it was apparent that a career combining kids and dogs would be a perfect fit for my talents and interests. My husband Nick and I moved to Iowa three years ago, which gave me the opportunity to pursue dog training full time and to start my own small business as a trainer and humane educator. I hold the KPA-CTP and CPDT-KA credentials as a trainer and I am also a certified humane education specialist. I am completing two certifications in canine behavior consultation, and while I currently only offer services for dogs, in the next couple of years I will expand to offer training for cats as well.

**Q: Tell us a little bit about your own pets.**

**A:** When she was less than a year old, my sweet shih tzu-poodle Marmalade was found being "kicked around" on the streets of Villalba, Puerto Rico. A kind person took her to Second Chance Animal Rescue Puerto Rico, where she was made ready for transport to Boston. After arriving in New England, she was driven to Random Rescue in Vermont. I searched Petfinder for a young adult, small, non-shedding, female dog who absolutely loved people and children in particular...and there she was! I don't know how she wasn't already scooped up, but I immediately applied to adopt her and am overjoyed she is in my life. She used to be a city girl in Boston, and now lives on a quiet acre in Ames.

**Q: Are you a crossover trainer or have you always been a force-free trainer?**

**A:** I have always been a force-free trainer, although I began training using the lure-reward method before I started using the clicker.

**Q: What do you consider to be your area of expertise?**

**A:** I offer a range of behavior modification and foundation skills training services in coaching and day training formats. I love working with adopted rescue dogs, and I am proud to offer family-friendly services for households raising kids and dogs together. Whether the pet owner is a

brand new puppy parent or is concerned about their adult dog who struggles with reactivity, I am here to help! I also provide in-home humane education for kids of all ages, including therapy dog birthday party visits, pet loss support consultation, and activities to help kids work through fear of dogs.

**Q: What drives you to be a force-free professional and why is it important to you?**

**A:** As a theater artist, I always viewed myself as very self-aware and emotionally intelligent. Through working with dogs and learning about the dynamics of behavior science, I've come to understand that simply expressing emotion or even masterfully replicating emotion onstage is not the same as emotional maturity, and that in reality our feelings are frequently deceptive rather than infallible truth. Engaging in force-free, relationship-based training gives me a more complete and genuine perspective on both canine and human behavior, and helps me practice being kind and gentle toward myself and others.

**Q: What is your favorite part of your job?**

**A:** My favorite aspect of owning my own business is that I can structure a workday that includes teaching dogs as well as kids...the best of both worlds! On any given day I may teach preschoolers about dog body language in the morning, conduct a day training session, head to the elementary school to hold a program for older kids, and meet with clients and their dogs for coaching sessions during the evening.

**Q: What reward do you get out of a day's training?**

**A:** I absolutely love to interact with dogs in their home environment and see them progress from session to session. Training truly takes months and years, not days and weeks; and yet, although the dog's time with Plucky Paws is just a drop in the bucket, we witness such a marked improvement in their behavior and wellbeing.



Photo © Stephanie Peters

Stephanie Peters came to dog training via a background in theater and animal therapy



**Q: Who has most influenced your career and how?**

A: I became fascinated by the field of primatology at the age of six, and my love of primates has remained a constant source of inspiration and insight over the years. I find that my interests in anthropology, child development, and canine cognition all intersect in an uncanny way.

**Q: What are some of your favorite positive reinforcement techniques for the most commonly encountered client-dog problems?**

A: Targeting is my favorite training technique for addressing a wide range of behavior modification challenges, as well as teaching basic and advanced skills. Targeting accomplishes a great deal in a short amount of time, and with far better results than a lure-reward approach. Best of all, it's fun and easy to do.

**Q: What awards or competition placements have you and your dog(s) achieved using force-free methods?**

A: Marmalade holds the CGC and CGCA titles with the AKC, and earned certification at both the national and local levels as a therapy dog. Marmalade and I completed the dog trainer professional program through Karen Pryor Academy.

**Q: What advice would you give to a new trainer starting out?**

A: I advise novice trainers to head to their local shelter, humane society, or rescue group to volunteer their time with the dogs and cats waiting

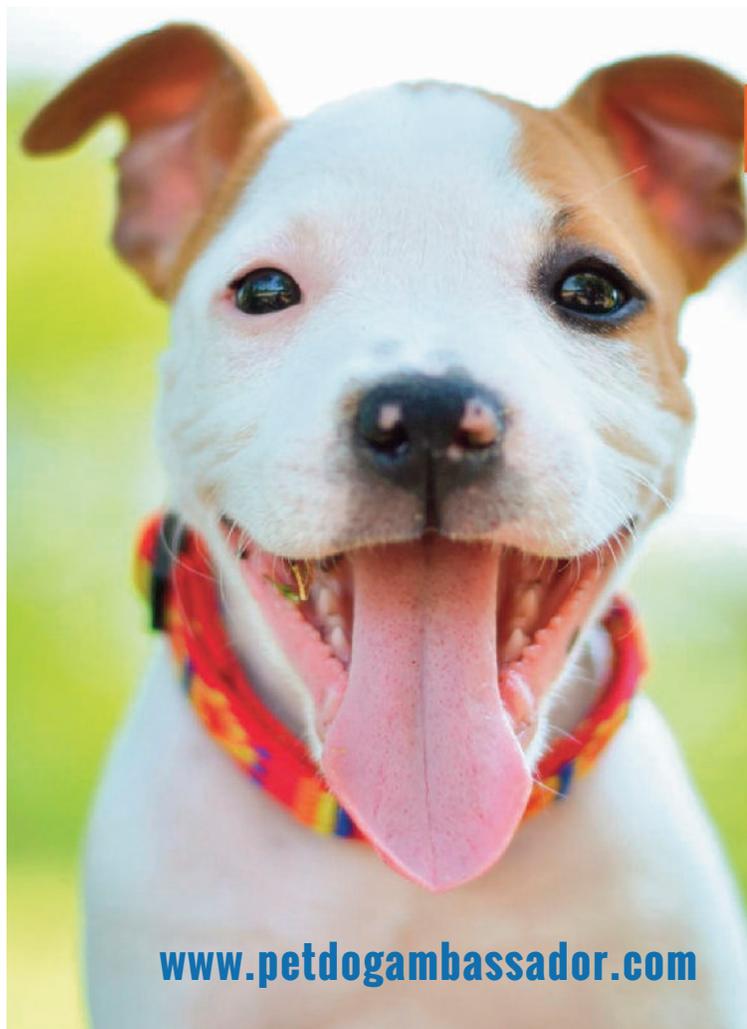
**“Engaging in force-free, relationship-based training gives me a more complete and genuine perspective on both canine and human behavior, and helps me practice being kind and gentle toward myself and others.” - Stephanie Peters**

for forever homes. I hone my skills considerably while volunteering, and the experience I gain with homeless pets continually reminds me why I want to make a difference in the lives of companion animals. Also — read, read, read! A great deal of animal training is self-taught, so take the initiative to complete your own reading and research on ethology, cognition, and behavior science.

**Q: How has PPG helped you to become a more complete trainer?**

A: The resources offered through PPG provide me with professional development opportunities, and the knowledge that I am part of a network of like-minded individuals is a morale boost! During summer 2016, I completed an internship in Dogtown at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, and the amazing Best Friends trainer Glenn Pierce suggested I join PPG. I had a wonderful time at the sanctuary again this April as an attendee at the PPG Training and Behavior Workshop. ■

**Plucky Paws, LLC ([pluckypaws.com](http://pluckypaws.com)) is located in Ames, Iowa, USA  
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