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Sat., 8/8/09
8:30 AM

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For more information and to register, please visit www.sheltercareevents.com.
Pre-registration is \$20 per individual.
Same day registration is \$25.

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References available.

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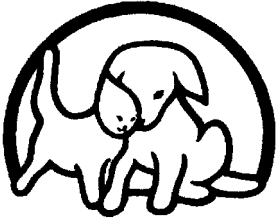
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From El Diablo to El Ángelito?

Did the Dog Whisperer tame the wild Chihuahua?
WORDS AND PHOTO BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

Lane County's baddest Chihuahua is back in town. El Diablo, once slated to be put to sleep for his viciousness at Lane County Animal Services, took time out from his busy schedule of TV shows and Hollywood parties for a mid-July visit to his former home at Luv-A-Bull Pit Bull Rescue.

Once the terrorizer of pit bulls 20 times his size at Liesl Wilhardt's rescue, El Diablo didn't give the anxious drooling pit bull pacing a nearby enclosure even a glance as he trotted after Wilhardt and his new owner Rich Mercer. Nor did he give this reporter anything more than a casual sniff before going on his doggie way — sniffing stuff, chewing some grass and casually barfing it back up. Pretty good for a dog that LCAS had to lock in a kennel within a kennel to keep him from attacking any unsuspecting humans.

Last year, after rescuing El Diablo, though she had made progress, Wilhardt found herself unable to fully control the 3-pound doggie devil. She called on top-dog trainer Cesar Millan of National Geographic Channel's show *The Dog Whisperer* for help. During the filming of the episode "Chihuahuas from Hell," Millan decided to bring the dog back to his Dog Psychology Center in L.A. for more work and even brought him into his own home.

Mercer, location manager and a dog handler for Millan, bonded with El Diablo as the dog toured and filmed episodes last year, and he adopted the dog. "He's a lifelong project," Mercer says. With ongoing training, El Diablo is now a "balanced dog," and he appears on many episodes of the popular TV show. "He's called upon to walk past the 'bad dogs' for the bad dog B-rolls," Mercer says. El Diablo ignores the dogs while they bark and growl, showing their aggression before Millan works with them. "He's come a long way," says Mercer, holding

the reformed dog as El Diablo licked his nose.

"They were calling him Sammy," says Wilhardt, "because Cesar believes in positive energy, but Diablo really seems to fit him." She says, "They haven't tried to change his personality. Diablo is still Diablo, but he's less fearful, more outgoing. He enjoys life more. But he still acts like a Chihuahua."

One of the best things about Diablo's happy ending, says Wilhardt, is that "it's enabled the rescue to help more dogs."

After the "Chihuahuas from Hell" episode aired, rescue groups in L.A. contacted Luv-A-Bull, and the rescue started up a program bringing Chihuahuas and other little dogs up from L.A., spaying and neutering them and adopting them out in Oregon where smaller dogs are less common in shelters. Other local rescues have followed suit.

"Also, other L.A. rescues have contacted Luv-A-Bull as a result of the show," says Wilhardt, who has taken in exceptional pit bulls from L.A., such as Rakim (renamed Morgan Freeman), an elderly pit that retired from Millan's pack to live out his days at Luv-A-Bull.

The most recent rescue is Hope, a sweet-tempered pit bull that was found on the streets of L.A., skinny, with oozing sores and signs of recently having had puppies. The puppies were never found. Hope was sponsored by Katherine Heigl of *Grey's Anatomy* and movie fame, who paid for her spay and medical care and had her sent to Luv-A-Bull to find a home.

To apply to adopt Hope, or any of our cover puppies (adoptable through Luv-A-Bull which paid for their care and medical bills), go to www.petfinder.com/shelters/OR182.html or email Wilhardt at lieslw@rio.com

El Diablo, however, is not up for adoption. The former terror has now been tamed and has found his forever home. 🐾