

Statistically pit bulls that wind up in shelters don't get out alive. Pit bulls that have been fought get even less of a chance, as it's long been assumed they are irredeemably vicious. When football star Michael Vick was convicted in 2007 of dog fighting as well as killing several of the pits in his "Bad Newz Kennels," it was assumed that the dogs would all be put to sleep. Even PETA advocated for euthanasia. But dedicated animal rescues stepped in and saved nearly all the animals. Many have been adopted out, and several have earned their Canine Good Citizenship awards. Others have become therapy dogs.

Vick is now out of prison and playing football again. President Obama incited controversy among pit bull advocates recently when he called Philadelphia Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie to commend him for giving Vick a second chance. Most pit bulls, advocates say, don't get such a chance. Vick is prevented under the rules of his probation, which lasts until May 2012, from getting a dog, though recently he's begun talking about getting a puppy.

Lane County Animal Services is packed with unwanted pit bulls. LCAS has a voucher program to help curtail breeding more of these dogs that can't find homes. Those dogs that do find homes are the lucky ones. After all, what kind of person would own a pit bull? As it turns out in Lane County, it's the kind of person who sells you your clothes, sells you an insurance policy or gives you a massage. It's businesswomen and university women. It's the kind of woman that likes to dress her dog up in pink clothes and paint its toenails. It's a woman who loves a good dog.



TARA PLAUNTY-JENSEN

controller at the Hilton Eugene and member of the hotel's executive committee

HAMMER

"If you ask anyone who knows him, they will tell you that Hammer should be the poster child for pit bulls. He is loving; he listens; he wouldn't hurt a fly; he is so concerned with where we are and what we are doing and just wants to be close to us at all times," says Tara Plaunty-Jensen. She is 24 weeks pregnant with her and husband Charlie's first child, which means she's had to take time off from her other career as Emerald City Roller Girl "Reign of Tara."

Hammer was a wedding present, bought by friends who ran across someone selling pit puppies at the local supermarket. The friends, she says, would have kept Hammer if it hadn't worked out, but she and her husband loved him. Plaunty-Jensen says, "He has changed my thoughts on dogs in general. I never thought I could love a big dog so much!"

Hammer is the epitome of politeness when it comes to playing outside in the Oregon mud. "When we let him outside and then back in, we lay down his towel and, instead of running in the house, he stops on his towel and picks up one paw at a time so we can wipe it off. When we're done, we give him a pat on the rear and he knows he can run into the house. He does this without prompting; he's just trained," says Plaunty-Jensen.

She says when Hammer goes for a walk, "People stop and ask if they can pet him. Sometimes they say they think he is smiling, which is funny because we always think that too." Plaunty-Jensen says, "It's hard to put into words the amazing that is Hammer."



LIESL WILHARDT

fine jewelry maker and founder of Luv-a-Bull

PICTURED WITH

MAMA NOELLE AND HER BABIES

(UP FOR ADOPTION WITH LUV-A-BULL)

"I have a master's degree from Harvard University in politics and religion which is completely irrelevant to my true passion — dog rescue," says Wildhardt. In addition to running Luv-a-Bull, she runs a small breed rescue called Luv-a-Little. Luv-a-Bull focuses on exceptional dogs with great temperaments and personalities, she says. In fact, the only mean dog she ever rescued, Wilhardt says, was a Chihuahua. That dog, whom she named El Diablo, landed Luv-a-Bull on an episode of Cesar Millan's *The Dog Whisperer* called "Chihuahuas from Hell."

In addition to the more than 400 dogs she's rescued through Luv-a-Bull, Liesl's own dogs, Esmarelda, Ellsinore, Josephine and Griffynn, a Shih tzu named Stella and a dachshund/pug mix named Blarney Stone, are rescues too. "My old matriarch, Blossom, died this past September at age 12, and has left a whole hole in my heart and my pack."

Wilhardt says, "It is estimated that nationally, only about one in every 800 pit bulls that enters a dog pound or animal shelter makes it out alive through adoption or rescue."

Mama Noelle, one of Wilhardt's many rescues up for adoption, was slated for euthanasia at an out-of-state-shelter. The pregnant dog was on the table, and the technician was just about to stick the needle in her leg to put her to sleep, but she wagged her tail, and the tech couldn't kill her. The shelter put out an urgent plea to all the rescues, and the Hiegl Foundation stepped in. Noelle and her pups were sent to Oregon and Luv-a-Bull.

Wildhardt says she grew up with a poodle in the family, but "I fell in love with the breed from seeing the pit bull Petey on TV as a kid. I went to college in L.A. and met a lot of pit bulls there. No matter how tough and mean looking they were, they were always sweet and loving with me. I loved that they were so strong and athletic, but gentle and playful too."