

Sunday Column – How Dogs Make Our Lives Better

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There is just something about dogs that makes me love them best! I don't care what color or what breed or what size they are. Dave and I have the whole range of sizes represented in our home, from our thirteen pound Chiweenie to our extra-large English Mastiff.

Our lives are richer because of them. There is always lots of love and activity in our home and a whole lot of silliness. On weekends we go on adventures to the Tuskegee Forest or to West Point Lake or to the best ever dog park in Auburn, AL. These guys keep us active.

In fact, a study published in the American Journal of Public Health a few years ago found that dog owners were 57% to 77% more likely to achieve sufficient physical activity to produce health benefits than non-dog owners.

The dog owners in this study perceived their neighborhoods as more attractive. They rated access to parks and nature reserves higher than non-dog owners. They also reported higher neighborhood cohesion and felt they had more social support from their families. To me this sounds like dog owners tend to be more socially connected and overall happier people.

Dave and I have had Sam, our 23 pound, strawberry blond, scruffy terrier mix for 9 years now. We love him to pieces but he isn't the kind of dog who is going to protect us from an intruder. Same with Tinker, our Chiweenie. They do provide an early warning system and that is a deterrent in itself to anyone who might otherwise want to help themselves to our television set.

About a year ago we adopted Lucy, our Mastiff. She is a gentle giant and never gets too ruffled unless someone is coming into the house or yard. She quickly recognizes our visitors for what they are and settles down as soon as she gets a proper greeting. Still, I wouldn't want to be the guy who was up to no good. I'm pretty sure she would get right down to business in this case.

Dogs, whether big or small, are the best crime fighters in our neighborhoods. In a neighborhood watch meeting many years ago our community officer said that criminals are opportunistic. They tend to do what is easy and walk away if they are given even a little bit of a hard time.

Dog owners get to know their neighbors because they are out and about with them. Maybe you've noticed what great social lubricants they can be. People who may not otherwise acknowledge a stranger walking down the street immediately connect to someone walking a dog. Well, at least they connect to the dog, then the person. That's good enough for me. I've met most of my neighbors while walking my dogs.

With 75 million dog walkers out there someone came up with the idea of Dog Walker Watch. Local law enforcement officers are training dog owners what to look for while they are out and about. Their familiarity with their neighborhoods helps them spot crime that might not catch the attention of an outsider driving through the neighborhood.

Large breed dogs, 44 pounds and up, are high-risk for euthanasia in our nations shelters. Think about the benefits of having a larger canine companion in your life the next time you're ready to adopt. I've

been a small dog person for years but I wouldn't trade our Lucy, and all of her slobbering, for anything. Her very presence may save our lives one day.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.