



Welcome Back Will!



Animal Care Technician Will Irwin calms a skittish dog at the Coachella Valley Animal Campus.

Employee Back at Work After Medical Leave

*Story by John Welsh
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Three boisterous dogs of quarantine row at the Coachella Valley Animal Campus were boisterous no more.

That's because Will Irwin is back.

Will, who turns 62 in December, suffered chest pains Sept. 23rd at the Thousand Palms-based shelter where he works as an animal care technician.

Everyone at the Thousand Palms shelter knows of the wonders Will does with some of the meanest, nastiest and biggest dogs that come in from the desert streets. These are also

some of the most fearful dogs — the type that might bite because they are so scared.

But Will works magic with these dogs. It's as if he's got a sirloin steak in his back pocket.

So what does he do on his first day back (Oct. 21) after his recovery? He converts three growling, barky-bark-bark dogs into mellow souls.

"These were three not-so-nice dogs," said Supervising Animal Care Technician Deanna Burnett. "But after Will spends some time with them, they're now mellowed out. He walks by and they come up to the front of the gate wagging their tails and

waiting for him."

Veterinary Technician Jo Marie Upegui described Will as patient and non-judgmental toward these special-needs dogs.

"He gives them all an equal chance," Jo Marie said. "He has a way of talking with them. He's got this body language. He works with the most fearful, the most unsocial. The ones that give you a hard stare or have their tail tucked underneath themselves. Will is a very forgiving man."

And the dogs seem to pick up on that forgiving side of Will.

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Working With the Meanest, Baddest, Biggest

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Will Irwin came to the Coachella Valley Animal Campus in April 2006.

Deanna Burnett started the same day as Will. She said she's always amazed at his ability to communicate with the Coachella Valley's toughest cases.

"He's so good with the animals," Deanna said. "He's truly dedicated to them. He really tries hard to rehabilitate the ones he can with the limited amount of time he has."

The baby steps the animals make sometimes gives these hard-to-handle ones a second chance. Certainly some of these dogs will never go to a loving home. But so many others travel to the adoption/rescue partners that work with the Department of Animal Services. He provides the first level of love — and also consults with his colleagues on the behaviorist team: Teryn Hartnett, Jackie Schart and Kristi Slane.

"Some of the rescue groups are able to see some potential in these dogs that they would not have ever seen if Will hadn't spent some time with them," said Senior Behaviorist Teryn Hartnett.

On Sept. 23rd one of those mean dogs proved a good friend to an ailing Will.

Will didn't necessarily suffer a heart attack. He called it a "warning sign." The chest pains were so bad they knocked him to his knees.

At that very moment he was working with a large, wolf-hybrid dog. "A big wolf boy," as Will called him.

"The dog caught me," Will said. "He didn't move. He knew something was wrong. He stood still and I used him to get up."

Will caught his breath, took some aspirin and found a colleague to let someone know he wasn't feeling well. The colleague, Animal Care Technician Jesus Pena, told Will: *You don't look well.*

Will, who lives in Cathedral City, called his daughter to get picked up and was soon hospitalized. He discovered one of his arteries was 60 percent clogged.

Three weeks later, there's Will back in quarantine row, working with the shelter's most challenging dogs. (It figures Will is a military man; He served in the Marines from 1966 to 1969.)

"I talk with them, I play with them," Will said. "I spend a few minutes with them. It's not a whole lot of time. But it makes their day. It makes mine too."



Every dog in quarantine row, such as this pit bull above, gets the same amount of love from dedicated Animal Care Technician Will Irwin. Even the most aggressive dogs seem to warm up to his good spirit. And the frightened ones start to trust. Will's patience helps such troubled dogs become more likely to be adopted — or transferred to one of Animal Services' rescue-group partner organizations.

Photos by John Welsh, Public Information Chief