



# Puppy Love

Times may be tough but hold on to your dreams. *Jane Ng* meets a spunky 26-year-old who gave up a stable career in journalism to be a dog-trainer.

**I**t was a leap of faith for Angie Tan to quit her job as a web journalist to become a dog-trainer, but she has no regrets about the decision. Prompted by her passion for dogs, she is today Singapore's first canine behaviour counsellor, certified by the Association of Companion Animal Behaviour Counsellors in the United States.

But Angie is no ordinary dog-trainer; she doesn't use choke chains or compulsion in her teaching methods. Instead, she is a pioneer practitioner in the exclusive use of non-violent and motivational techniques.

#### POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

"Basically, it is a form of training which rewards good behaviour and ignores bad behaviour. It lets the dog think a lot more as it has to figure out how to get the reward," says Angie, who founded Puppylove, a dog-obedience training school.

Modelled after the latest techniques practised in North America and Europe, the method focuses on instructing the dog on what is right, rather than constantly correcting it for doing the wrong things. Conditioning is done by reinforcing desired behaviours using praises and treats. This humane

method of training dogs has been applied to the teaching of children, as well as a wide variety of animals including cats, birds, horses and dolphins.

"By comparison, the age-old method of using choke chains is like rote-learning. When the dog misbehaves, the trainer pulls at the choke chain but when the dog does the right thing, there is no positive reinforcement," explains Angie.

#### USEFUL METHOD

Each year, many dogs are given up or abandoned by owners who do not understand normal canine behaviour, says the young lass. She hopes Puppylove can help educate dog lovers about how dogs think, and teach them how to communicate more effectively with their canine friends.

"Sometimes owners can't cope with dogs that have behavioural problems such as excessive barking, aggression and hyperactivity. They may then use force on the dog which does not actually solve the problem," says Angie.

"In the case of aggressive dogs, compulsion techniques worsen the condition by increasing the level of aggression, rather than rehabilitating the dog. The non-violent motivational techniques we practise can help owners in areas where traditional

compulsion methods do not," she adds.

The non-aggressive method advocated by Angie may also save the canine from death in some instances. "Finding a new home for naughty dogs with behavioural problems is not easy and because of this, euthanasia is often considered." But according to her, this can actually be prevented if dog owners are willing and able to invest the necessary time and commitment to train their dog.

Under the direction of animal behaviour specialist Robert DeFranco, she graduated from the Animal Behavior Center of New York, United States. The course cost Angie a whopping \$30,000, but to her, "it was money well-spent".

"I learnt about the history of dogs, how the different breeds came about, and how to treat dog disorders. It was a valuable experience," says Angie, who has also studied under internationally renowned veterinarian and animal behaviourist, Dr Ian Dunbar. In return, she puts her acquired knowledge to good use by offering advice to dog owners through an online column called "Ask the CBC" which can be accessed through her website, [www.puppylove.com](http://www.puppylove.com).

#### A PERSONAL TOUCH

To ensure training is effective, and that both handler and dog receive the attention they deserve, class sizes are always limited to not more than four dogs per session. "We make it a point to better understand our students by taking a detailed case history of each individual dog even before any formal training starts," says Angie.

But, as with modifying habits in humans, there is no magic-pill solution when dealing with behavioural problems in dogs. "Each case I am asked to consult on is unique. I look at the behaviour and design a treatment plan for the dogs' caregivers to implement. Progress comes in incremental steps over time," she adds.

## And They Call It Puppylove...

Puppylove began as an online store offering dog toys and accessories that had yet to find its way into the local pet shops. However, a passion for dogs led its founder, Angie Tan, to wonder why these crazy canines did the silly things they did.

Her journey of discovery led her to the United States, where she learnt the alternative non-violent technique of training animals based on established scientific learning theories not yet widely practised in Singapore.

Angie also is the founder and spokesperson of Bumbling Beagles, an informal club of beagle owners, numbering over 100 members. She finds new families for homeless beagles and volunteers her expertise in treating canine behaviour problems to non-profit dog shelters.

It is important to coach the owner how to effectively communicate with their dog using voice control, hand signals and body language, explains Angie. "I often tell my students that we train with our brain, not our brawn. Unfortunately, as the dominant species, humans have a natural tendency towards using compulsion when training dogs."

However, she believes that training can also come at any time of the day, and not just formally. "Even when bringing your dog out for a walk, you can reinforce what was learnt in class." And that is what she does for her own pets, says Angie, who has four cats and four dogs at home - three are beagles and one is a Border Collie. And if you were wondering, no, they do not have any problems living together at all - not after going through obedience instruction.

As for Angie, she has found her dream job in Puppylove. "I'm happier training dogs. I don't really see it as a job because I love it and am enjoying every moment of it." ♀



PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN WONG

