Kenneth Slaughter is a short, talkative man with dark skin and an infectious smile. He wears his “dress blues,” the uniform given to the inmates to wear when they have company. As he tries to get control of his 3-month-old lab, Candi, she seems to laugh at his efforts. She takes advantage of his distraction and sneaks off to play with the other puppies.

Michael Smith used to keep busy by reading, writing and doing artwork and while that helped pass the time, only so much of that can be done in prison. He said being with the dogs made him aware of “emotions I haven't felt in over 12 years.”

It's the beginning of fall and the leaves have started to change. Nestled between the colorful hills of Bland County lays a cold grey set of building. Its walls are topped with bared wire and security towers greet visitors at the entrance. The sign seen from the road reads “Bland Correctional Center.”

Behind the chain link fence of the prison, there are close to 30 labradors, poodles, labradoodles and golden retrievers running around the courtyard. The animals are currently living, training and playing with the unlikeliest of allies: the inmates.

Executive Director of St. Francis Services Dogs of Roanoke, Cabell Youell, said the medium-security prison has participated in the PUPS program since 2002. The inmates act as “puppy raisers,” caring for the puppies and teaching them basic obedience tasks, preparing them to move on to become a St. Francis service dog.

“The inmates do an excellent job puppy raising, therefore raising the quality of the dogs we place,” Youell said. “Last, but not least, the program has an extremely positive impact on the inmates.”

Smith, serving a 17-year sentence at Bland Correctional Center for kidnapping and armed robbery, is new to their PUPs program. He was recently given Flash- a female, as he was quick to point out. When describing his former prison life, his gaze becomes distant and he has trouble finding the right words.

“The way I look at it, it's the best thing that could happen to me,” Smith said. “Imagine I can make someone's life better and kind of make my life better.”

Slaughter has been in prison for 11 years for armed grand larceny. He says training Candi offers more than just a way to pass the time. He says her training helps him maintain a sense of privacy while her presence helps with the loneliness of prison life.

“How can you not like someone who is excited to see you from the time they wake up to when they go to bed?” he asks.

The wing that houses the participants of the PUPS program resembles more an all-male dormitory, with the men socializing and joking with each other while the black, yellow and golden dogs roam the hall, looking for inmates or other dogs to give them some attention.

But this is not a dormitory; this is still prison. The cells are no bigger than a closet, enough to fit a twin-size bed with a dog crate underneath, a small television mounted to the wall and some personal belongings.

The bathrooms are shared by the inmates and have no walls, just shower curtains and a toilet with a partition a few feet high.

The inmates are as different as their crimes: black and white; tall and short; soft-spoken and outgoing; friendly and reserved.

If they want reprieve from their solitary rooms, they must ask permission from one of the many security guards present. Even then, they are encountered by dozens of other men trying to do the same.

The inmates each describe a similar routine for their dog and them: Each wakes up around 5:30 a.m. And takes the dog out; they train the dogs before breakfast; only after the dogs eats is it the inmate's turn for breakfast; then the dogs get an exercise period when they can play and socialize with other dogs and inmates in the courtyard; their evenings consist of more training, dinner and bed around 9 p.m. Training and caring for their puppy is all that matters.

Not that they mind.

“I learn more about myself than the dog,” said Kacy Tolliver, 38, in charge of a 3-month-old golden retriever, aptly named Goldie. She is Tolliver's fourth St. Francis puppy. His past dogs are Deuce, Cali and Frosty.

Tolliver, 38, is serving a 20-year sentence for armed robbery. He is a soft-spoken, but friendly man. Some of his few possessions are a photo album with pictures of his three children and Jada, the rottweiler he left behind, and a journal. In this journal, he recorded words he associated with Goldie and himself. The page full of adjectives included “playful,” “strong-willed,” “affectionate,” and “vocal.”

Paul Patterson, 60, understands the importance of giving back to the community while incarcerated. Before his involvement in the PUPS program, he served as a tutor, helping other inmates working toward their GED.

He said taking care of the puppies in the program restored to him a sense of responsibility and commitment. He once put his mattress on the floor by his sick puppy's crate so he could monitor her if she took a turn for the worse. Patterson has been serving a life sentence for murder since 1971.

Latasha Dowell, Bland Correctional Counselor and the director of the PUPS program at Bland said it has helped morale among the trainers, as well as the other inmates. “If you have a negative attitude, it affects the dogs,” she said.

Patterson agrees. The inmates enjoy the company of the dogs, even if it's temporary. “You should see the dogs in the yard!” he said.

Mark Elder, 36, has had his puppy, Angel for 14 months. He said training her makes him feel relevant and nurturing her relieves his stress. Elder is no stranger to training dogs during his 18-year sentence.

Prior to his time at Bland, he participated in the Save Our Shelters-Pen Pals Program while he was incarcerated at James River Correction Center in Maidens, Va. until it closed in 2011.

Robert Hough, a man missing some teeth but with personality to spare, used the PUPS program to stay sober. He is incarcerated for armed robbery and was transferred from Lawrenceville Correctional Center for good behavior.

He said substance abuse is a “feelings disease” and the dogs provided the comfort he needed to overcome his drug addiction. “A hug is few and far between in this kind of life,” Hough said.

The program's strict behavior standard kicked him out of the program once after he was caught with drug paraphernalia, and he said he has tried hard to stay out of trouble since then. “There's a lot of respect for what we do,” he said.

53 year-old Bernard Arthur is a tall man with a receding hairline and rosy cheeks. He is serving 22 years for fraud and recently became involved in the PUPS program. He said his inspiration to apply was to give back to the community.

“I might not live until my sentence is over,” he said. “So I really want to do something to help people.” Arthur is up for parole in 2019.

John Richardson, Bland Correctional unit manager said the PUPS program is one of the best tools in public safety. In order for the inmates to participate in the program, they must reside in the honors Building, reserved for inmates who have proved good behavior.

If the inmate receives any strikes on his record, he is thrown out of the program. Second chances are granted if no other infraction is obtained.

Although some inmates participating in the program are incarcerated due to violent crimes, those in prison for domestic or animal abuse are not allowed in the PUPS program.

Keith Miller, 34, was recently incarcerated when he learned his 4-year-old son had been diagnosed with Leukemia. The former coal miner is six years into his 21-year-long sentence for grand larceny.

He said his son’s illness motivated him to join the program because he understood the service dogs’ impact on the recipients. “You know you’re giving back to someone when you’re working with the dogs,” Miller said.

After their basic training, many of the dogs advance to a higher level of training. They learn to turn lights on and off, throw away or comfort its owner by nuzzling their side.

Some of these dogs go to Robert Fisher, a 45-year-old serving 15 years for check fraud. He has trained eight dogs throughout his five and a half years at Bland. He is currently training Dart, 4-months-old, and Paris, one-year-old.

His dogs are referred to as Master Veterans, because of their intensive training. This category of service dogs is qualified to go to individuals with neurological disorders.

Fisher says he enjoys receiving “Thank You” notes from the recipients of his service dogs. “It’s heartwarming to know the things you can do in here can help people on the outside,” he said.

According to a study done by Dana and Andrea Britton at Kansas State University, the first successful inmate adoption program began on accident in 1975, after an inmate at Lima State Hospital in Ohio adopted an injured sparrow.

After a year-long observation, the prison concluded that the inmates required half as many medications and experienced a reduction in violence and suicide attempts.

The first formal animal training program began in 1981 at Washington Correction Center for Women in Gig Harbor, Wash.

Warden Larry Jarvis has been at Bland Correctional Center for 15 years. He says the PUPS program helps the inmates prepare for life outside the barbed wire and security towers. “It’s exactly what the director wants as a healing program,” he said.

Dowell says one of Bland Correctional’s former inmates used his training to get a job at St. Francis after his release. St. Francis Service Dogs has programs for individuals with disabilities like muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis, autism, paralysis and brain injuries.

The Facility Dog Program has the dogs working in health care, education or a courtroom setting- the dogs can provide comfort to victims of violence. The Reading Program is one where volunteer dogs and owners assist children to improve their reading.