

The street kid and the stray

When Alvin (not his real name) first met the friend he holds so close to him in this photograph, he'd been given up for lost by most of society.

A victim of sexual abuse, domestic violence and alcoholism, Alvin bunked school most days. Scantly clad, even in freezing weather, he often preferred to spend his time on the school roof. Social workers and counsellors specialising in child abuse cases, were at a loss as to how to reach Alvin, literally and figuratively.

Then last year, Phil Rogers, a social worker with CAFDA (Cape Flats Development Association), had an idea. "I had attended a lecture in Cape Town by Phil Arkow, the world-renowned expert on the link between animal cruelty and human violence," she recalls. "Alvin was a rough, tough little boy who'd been involved with some really cruel activities with kittens. After listening to Phil Arkow, I decided to see if pet therapy would help Tony," she says. "I contacted Cicely Blumberg who had co-founded DARG (Domestic Animal Rescue Group) and together with Alvin, I met her at the DARG kennels

in Hout Bay."

Cicely takes up the story: "I gave Alvin a puppy with mange and said to him:



Photo: Cicely Blumberg

'Alvin, *you* are going to get this puppy right.' Phil Rogers brought him to our kennels once a week. We showed him how to bathe the puppy gently without getting soap in its eyes and ears. We showed him how to feed the puppy and taught him the rudiments of training. We took the two of them - Alvin and the puppy - to the beach so that they could roll in the sand and play in the dunes together.

"Finally, the puppy's hair grew back and we found a home for him. I'll never forget Alvin's response when I said to him: 'Alvin, you did this. You gave this dog back its life.' The smile of joy and pride that he gave me is etched in my memory forever."

Phil Rogers says that through pet therapy, Alvin learnt how to care, something he had never been taught and almost certainly, had never experienced. In the months that followed, he returned to school and was no longer disruptive. "Sadly," says Phil, "we were unable to follow through with pet therapy for Alvin and he's returned to the streets. Learning to care for all forms of life is not a quick fix therapy. It is an on-going learning process to which all children should be exposed."