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Interview with Deirdre “Little Darling” Franklin

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **DEIRDRE “LITTLE DARLING” FRANKLIN** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 244.*

JASMIN: Welcome to Our Hen House, Deirdre!

DEIRDRE: Thank you so much for having me! I’m really excited.

MARIANN: We’re excited that you’re here. And we know and love the Pinups for Pitbulls calendar and have had it in the past. And in fact Jasmin and Rose were the Missies February for 2012. And can you give people who haven’t seen it an idea of what the calendar looks like?

DEIRDRE: Absolutely. It is a 12 by 12 calendar and it’s full of really happy pictures of dogs and their ladies, or dogs that are being paired with different ladies, depending on how they came to us. But we feature all rescued dogs in our calendar, and it’s pinup scenes so it has a ‘50s or ‘60s classic pinup look. But we like to push the envelope a little and get creative and not really stick to standards of like a classic Elvgren or anything like that. We like to really play around and be creative and show people that these dogs are just dogs and they’re individuals and give them a proper light to be seen in.

JASMIN: I completely love the organization and the calendar and was so excited when Rose and I were in it two years ago. But there’s a lot more to the organization than the calendar. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

DEIRDRE: Absolutely. We travel all over the country educating people about breed specific legislation and laws affecting dogs in general. And we just started joining the pet expo circuit and I do a talk about breed specific legislation at all the pet expos around the country, with Shorty Rossi from Pit Boss. And really, what we’re trying to do is get people who aren’t just pet people or dog people, for example, to understand that all dogs are individuals. And so we go to tattoo conventions, comic cons, places like that. We’ll display our wares which help fundraise for our cause, but we also are there to be a recipient of information for people if they’re interested. It’s kind of like a confessional sometimes. People will come up and tell us why they don’t like these dogs or why they’re afraid of these dogs and we can actually listen to them and give them a sounding board, be patient with them, and then also help educate them. And most people leave educated and excited and changed, and not everybody and we don’t expect that. But it’s nice because we go out of the box instead of just talking to our fellow advocates. We really want to reach the general public because we’re an education based organization.

JASMIN: I love that you go to tattoo conventions as one of the places you do your outreach. That is just so great. And I know that a lot of our listeners are already familiar with breed specific legislation but I'm sure that there are some who aren't. And I'd love for you to talk a little bit more about that. I just want to interject with a quick story that Mariann and I were driving across the country a couple years ago with our dog Rose and we couldn't believe the breed specific legislation that we were literally driving through. In fact, in the town where my brother lives in Overland Park, Kansas, there's a very, very strict ban on pitbulls. And of course we were staying there overnight and it blew our minds, but more so than that it blew my brother's mind because the whole animal rights world is not a big part of his life on a day to day basis. So when he heard about it he was outraged. Can you tell our listeners a little bit more about what breed specific legislation is and how we can get past this?

DEIRDRE: Absolutely, and I'm very familiar with stories like you just told because we do travel extensively with our dogs around the country to do these events and it's really pretty pathetic that we have to look at a map online of areas with BSL to make sure our dogs aren't going to be taken away. So to give back story for people who don't know what breed specific legislation is, the simple version of it is legislation that is passed either by a municipality or a city or an ordinance in some cases, and basically certain people believe that certain dogs are capable of more bites, are a more common issue and they're blaming a dog. So they're not understanding that the context of a dog bite doesn't exist because of a dog, it exists because of a person at the other end of the leash, if there's even a leash. So the common issues that actually lead to bites are things like dogs being tethered all day, dogs that are loose and that are running around, dogs that aren't spayed and neutered. So these are issues that are people related problems. And cities will look at it and they'll see like bite statistics for example and say, "We have a dog problem, we have a bite problem, and it's gotta be these dogs because that's what we read about in the paper." So there's this very circular problem where somebody will report that a dog's attacked somebody and they'll assume that it's a pitbull-type dog even though identifying a pitbull-type dog is also a really big challenge because there's no such thing as an actual pitbull. So there's so many layers of this issue so it's kind of complicated, but the simple way of looking at it is it's choosing to say that a certain kind of dog is dangerous because of how it looks, not because of how it behaves. So it really gets down to fear and other things.

I actually did my key study at Drexel University for my Master's degree on breed specific legislation. And this issue, my professors could care less when I first started talking to them about it, 'cause they also saw me as like an animal activist and all these things. And I was like, "I'm not what you're assuming of me. I'm telling you this is a bigger issue and let me prove it to you." So it was really a great opportunity to be able to show people who honestly -- like, cat people or people who just generally don't think about things like this, to put it in front of them and really sound it off in front of them, because sometimes I feel like as an advocate, if you're just inside your own community you see it a certain way and you don't see it the way other people see it. So being conscious of how the rest of the world looks at this too or other people -- like the fact that most people are just ignorant of it and have no idea that if you're in Denver, Colorado with a pitbull-type dog, your dog will be taken away and euthanized regardless of whether you're walking it on a leash, regardless of whether you're a responsible citizen, has nothing to do with it. But the biggest problem with BSL is that you're punishing responsible people who would already take care of their dog and not be creating statistics and outlaw behavior, if they're trying to get rid of something like dogfighting, which is a federal offense. Or if you're trying to get rid of what they believe is

certain kinds of people, those people don't follow the law anyway. So you're really punishing responsible people who care already. That's a big issue.

MARIANN: I love so much that, in both this and in your work in going to conventions, you focus so much on people who aren't familiar with the issues rather than, as too many people do, just preaching to the choir. And I know that one of the new tools that Pinups for Pitbulls has for reaching people is the new book. Can you tell us about the new book?

DEIRDRE: Yes, thank you. That was an amazing opportunity that came our way a couple years ago. The editor at the Overlook Press, Dan Crissman, or senior editor, contacted me because he wanted me to write a pitbull history book. And I, as an advocate again, was really, I don't want to say I don't care about the history of pitbull-type dogs, but I care much more about the future of them. So I was like the last person on earth that he really wanted for that project, 'cause I was like, "Well, I'll write two pages about that and then I'll tell you what needs to happen." So once we started talking and once he started looking at our calendars of the past and things like that, he started to see that there was a really nice mass appeal because of the way that we present ourselves and the images of these dogs. And he has a pitbull-type dog himself.

So little by little we went back and forth for a year and had meetings and tried to figure out how this would go, but finally it became a compilation of pretty much the last decade of Pinups for Pitbulls. 2015 will be our 10-year anniversary. So it'll be a history of Pinups for Pitbulls. And there'll be a story about Carla Lou who was our founding dog who was my true love, who was my whole reason that I started the organization, who we lost in 2012 to cancer. But she lived to be 18 so she was a very happy girl all the way through. And then it'll be mostly a collection of pictures and some stories and hero dogs, so some of the Vick dogs, some other dogs from dogfighting rings that are now therapy dogs, and stories like that will be in the center of the book as well. And it kinda breaks up into different sections, and one of my favorite sections is behind the scenes, to show people that we're not classic pinup girl 24/7. In fact I'm pretty much the polar opposite in real life, so I like to be in yoga pants and a tank top most of the time. But it's just nice to be able to have that opportunity because again we're gonna be able to reach a new audience and reach people that we otherwise couldn't reach. Barnes and Noble bought 2500 copies for their holiday endcap already.

JASMIN: Great.

DEIRDRE: So that's amazing.

JASMIN: Wow. When does it come out?

DEIRDRE: It comes out October 16th.

JASMIN: Okay, excellent.

MARIANN: Excellent, perfect gift.

JASMIN: Yeah, perfect timing too.

DEIRDRE: And it's affordable, too. It's \$27.95 so it's not like crazy expensive but it's a hardcover, all-color book. So it's nice that it'll be a nice, simple thing that people can pass along for a stocking or...

JASMIN: Do you have as we do a longstanding love of pinups? Is that how this started, or did it really start with pitbulls? Which came first, the pinup or the pitbull?

DEIRDRE: I like it. That should be the title of this interview. Yes and no. I was doing pinup modeling at the time before I started Pinups for Pitbulls, and I really just liked being -- I liked playing dress up and I liked seeing like different characters that can come out of an image by just playing and modeling or whatever, but I wasn't truly serious about it. But I started to have an audience that really liked it and followed me and became fans. And that audience ended up helping me fundraise, before I started Pinups for Pitbulls, so that I could go to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and help with animal search and rescue. So I suddenly had this audience who liked me for my modeling but then wanted to help me be able to do what I thought was important at the time. And so they kind of came together but I guess modeling came first. But I was a burlesque performer for a long time as well, and so I started to feel like it was great that I could get people's attention but it felt empty to me. I enjoyed the modeling part but I wanted it to do something, so I put it to work.

MARIANN: I love that story. I love that people who followed you as a pinup helped you out with your work for dogs. And for other people out there who are aspiring pinups like Jasmin, and like me, like, 40 years ago --

DEIRDRE: There is no age limit on pinup, that's one of the best things about it.

MARIANN: All right, you never know. So tell us how you find and choose your models.

DEIRDRE: Well, we do an application process every year. So we put up a questionnaire on our website, and people make a \$50 donation to apply and that helps us to be able to fund our cause and move things forward. And we are a registered 501(c)(3) so it is also tax deductible. But we put up a questionnaire and ask people to tell us what we do from their perspective, we ask them to tell us are they an advocate and why they do what they do, and do they volunteer, is their dog spayed and neutered. It's pretty, relatively simple but we ask them to keep it short, which a lot of people struggle with. So we had almost 800 applications this year, which was amazing. But it's also really, really, really hard because now more than ever, because we finally have an educated following and audience, there's a lot of really amazing people who are applying. And it's really -- we have 10 judges who spend about a month going through all of those applications and getting it down to 12 is really ridiculous.

MARIANN: Yeah, I'm sure.

DEIRDRE: But sometimes my struggle if you're interested is we hear from these people at that time of the year and then we never hear from them again until the next year or at all. And so that bums me out because as an advocate, it's great that we're fundraising, we're able to do that so at least there's buy-in in the front. But it's really frustrating to know that there's 800 people who really care, that want to be in our calendar, but maybe 150 of them actually want to be involved after if they don't get in. So that's frustrating, and every year that's a little emotional for me.

JASMIN: Are they doing their own advocacy for the rest of the year, or is that just --

DEIRDRE: No, they just wanted to be in the calendar a lot of the time, so that's where there's the bum-out.

JASMIN: Yeah, no, that is a bum-out, but I think that your book really has the capability of reaching people in a much different way because it sounds like it's also kind of a coffee table book. And I know when that's right in front of you, as this kind of breed specific legislation is right in front of us, but when there's actually a reminder in front of us in hardcover, then how can we possibly ignore it? That's how I feel looking at my dog every day thinking of all of the dogs just like her who are being killed today. She's my reminder.

DEIRDRE: Absolutely.

JASMIN: So for people who don't necessarily, who aren't lucky enough to share a home with a pitbull-type dog, having your book will be a very good reminder for them. And just going back to your book for a minute, Deirdre, you mentioned your dog passed away -- I'm so sorry -- a couple years ago, though it sounds like your dog had a very long and full life. I'm so sorry, but I can't remember the dog's name?

DEIRDRE: Carla Lou.

JASMIN: Carla Lou.

DEIRDRE: Yes.

JASMIN: Can you tell us more about Carla Lou and how Carla Lou was part of the beginning of Pinups for Pitbulls?

DEIRDRE: Absolutely. So this was my first education into what was going on, and I was 19 years old when all of this happened. I get chills every time I tell this story and it's amazing to me that 18 years later that I'm still just as emotional as I was back then. But I volunteered at a place in Philadelphia at the time that was an animal refuge, they called themselves. And they had a kill pitbull policy, and I'd never heard of anything like that because I was 19 and wide eyed and a little animal rights person back then too and I was very green and a total idealist. I'm just not green anymore but I definitely believe in a lot of the things that I do and like to put them into action. But it was at the front desk and I'd always dreamed of having a husky. Like, there was no other dog I wanted because I loved wolves and that was 19-year-old logic of why you get a dog, because of how it looks, and so I really wanted a husky.

And I was at the front desk and this woman came in who was dropping off a dog that she had found who looked like she'd just had a litter of puppies and she told us that she found the dog and wanted to help get it off the street and into the shelter. And they told the lady at the front desk in front of me that if she left that dog the dog would be euthanized because it was a pitbull. And I couldn't believe my ears or eyes. This dog was amazing and so sweet and they asked me to bring her back. And they told the lady if they took her to any other shelter that she'd probably have a better chance of surviving because they would definitely euthanize her there but for whatever reason the lady just turned her back and left the dog and left crying. And that was that, so I took the dog into the back and came out to the front and said, "I want to adopt this dog. I'll take her." And they were like, "No, you can't. She's a pitbull. It's our policy" and whatever. So I couldn't believe it.

And this was 1996 or so, so I had a compact desktop computer and there was no Google, and I basically rode my bike home and tried to find a dog rescue anywhere in the country that could help me, potentially adopt the dog for me and let me adopt it through them or -- I was, again, total idealist wanting to figure this out. So I found this place called Chako in Texas and they actually got involved. I emailed them and I asked them if they could help me pull this dog and that I was just desperate to get her out of the shelter before they euthanized her. So they sent faxes over. They actually were extremely responsive and helped me, but the refuge -- where I volunteered every week -- told her absolutely not, that the dog will be euthanized because it's a pitbull. And so she came back to me and said she's really sorry but the dog has probably already been euthanized and that's the end of the story. And so I just I could not comprehend a world that could do that for no good reason. The dog could have just walked out the door with me and didn't exist yet. Like, why? I just couldn't understand that. I still don't understand that.

So the lady from the rescue called Chako, now they're in California, told me that she had just found a dog, or she had just pulled a dog from the shelter who had been abandoned in a basement who was there for a few weeks by herself, and if I was interested I could apply for that dog. So I let her know that I would like to apply for that dog 'cause it just felt like kismet and I had no idea what I was doing anyway so what the heck at that point. So it took about a month to go through the application process, I had to pull a police report and I didn't even know what she looked like until the night before she was shipped to me from Texas. And she was like in a pole barn in this dark picture that they sent me like the night before and I was like, what am I doing? So I went to Newark, New Jersey to pick her up at the cargo area and was really actually scared because I'd never really interacted with a pitbull-type dog before and didn't know if I'd made a mistake, or if this dog's been traveling all day, what's she gonna be like? But she came out of the gate and I took her out of her crate and she was very, very happy, jumped all over me, kissed me incessantly. And the rest is history.

So it's quite certainly another roundabout way of getting to the center of it. She was my light. And I got her when she was about a year, a year and a half old so we grew up together. We lived in New York City during 9/11 together, we lived in San Francisco and in Philly. We drove across country twice, we did everything together. So she was my definite best friend and inspiration. She was just grace in action, she was such a good spirited dog and she was so easy with everybody and everything. So I never really had to work very hard to train her or get her to be a good dog in any way. Like, she was a good dog no matter what and she just was like a good spirit. So once she passed in August of 2012 I was pretty thrown by that even though I knew she was 18 and I was really lucky that she lived that long. But I was scared for about a decade of her life because it always said 8-10 years was their average lifespan. So I spent about eight years being like, "Is this it?" so appreciating every day and learning to appreciate every day. But it was pretty crazy.

JASMIN: How have things changed since then in terms of awareness about pitbull issues? Do we have reason to hope that the society is coming around, that the laws are coming around too?

DEIRDRE: Yes. There are a lot of naysayers who would say the opposite, but I can tell you firmly yes, things are getting better, especially having done this for 10 years straight now. Around the time that we first started, the Michael Vick case was coming out and there was

press about these dogs and so I started to see people go from seeing these dogs who they thought were monsters to understanding that these dogs were victimized. And that I think was one of the biggest turning points in our advocacy work because, even though it was a terrible situation, it really shed a lot of light on what was happening to these dogs and how these dogs could -- a lot of these dogs didn't even have to be rehabilitated. They were just great dogs, solid dogs from the beginning, so they became therapy dogs and their stories started to spread and people were interested in their stories.

And now it's really funny 'cause 10 years ago at our booth most people had no idea what we were talking about, and now random people will come up to our booth and tell us what's going on and tell us about dogs being nanny dogs or whatever and give us the facts, and we're like, "Yeah, we know." I mean, no, we're not like that, but it's really nice to know that people are starting to -- even if it's just a stupid BuzzFeed thing that they read, people are reading it and people are taking it in and people are spreading it. And so I really, I firmly believe in people and I know the laws are getting better. And now when people are starting to think about putting BSL on the list for a city, most people are hyper aware and on top of it and active and stop it before it gets started. So it's really nice to see that this last year was one of the best years for laws being undone for BSL. And this year, the first half of this year has also been a lot of cities thinking about it and getting rid of it because they realized you can't stop dog bites, because all dogs have teeth, by saying a dog looks a certain way and taking it off the street because of that.

MARIANN: That's really great news and I've been seeing that a little bit, but you're so on top of these issues, so you really have the overview and it's great to hear that the sense that I've had that things are getting better really is true. And your story reminded me so much of Rose's, our dog, that she was also in a shelter that killed all pitbulls, and they actually had an underground railroad of employees who unbeknownst to management somehow managed to sneak out a few dogs. And it just shows how heartbroken everybody was and it's so good to see some of these policies dying. So I think that's wonderful news and I hope it continues in that direction. And of course you are doing all you can to keep things moving in that direction and your calendar and your book are major tools for that. And can you tell people how to get them, both the calendar and the book?

DEIRDRE: Absolutely. And I just want to say to you before I do that, people are amazing and people don't hear enough about things like your dog being taken out to an underdog railroad -- hah, underdog railroad.

JASMIN: Underdog railroad!

DEIRDRE: Exactly! Oh, my God, there's a new phrase.

JASMIN: That's brilliant, that's your new book title.

DEIRDRE: That's amazing, an underground railroad or underdog railroad, just the visual that that puts in my head. And I think people forget that so many people care and so many people aren't heard about or aren't making themselves heard and just do their little part. And if we all did our part together then we would have finished this years ago and we could finish this now. But there's so much struggle I think in infighting and nonsense sometimes in the advocacy world at all different levels of advocacy. I'm also vegan and have been an advocate my whole, pretty much my entire thinking life. But I really want people to know, if

they take anything else away from this interview, that we can actually work together and we can do amazing things when we work together and when we all know that each of us has a part in this and can finish this if we work together, that all of us doing great work separately doesn't help anybody in the long run.

JASMIN: I love that you said that, Deirdre. And of course we're vegan as well, and I love that the whole pitbull issue is something that we can actually really fix. Like, I believe we can fix it all, but when you kind of break the issues down a little bit, we could actually succeed at this sooner rather than later and that really gives me hope. And when I did the Pinups for Pitbulls calendar a couple years ago, I was really excited that I found professionals working in the pinup world who were committed to veganism and creating boas that were not made out of feathers, for example, and committed to cruelty-free makeup, and so I love that there is such a crossover between the farmed animal advocacy world and the pitbull advocacy world.

DEIRDRE: Me too, and it's funny, we try to be not sneaky per se but we like to attract people with all of that and then educate them once we have their attention, and it works really well. But it's nice because so many people who are drawn to the cause who otherwise wouldn't think about veganism or wouldn't think about other things just see me not being a preachy person who chooses this lifestyle, and if they choose to ask me why then I can tell them about that too. And it's just a sidebar to me, but sometimes it changes somebody's entire life and saves animals that way as well. So it's really nice that it all ties together.

JASMIN: How can people get the calendar and the book? 'Cause I'm sure our listeners are gonna be all over this.

DEIRDRE: Well, they can preorder the 2015 calendar now on our website and they can also preorder the book which will be out, both of them will be out in October, at www.pinupsforpitbulls.org, or if they google Pinups for Pitbulls it should be one of the first things that comes up. But we have a Facebook page and Instagram, it's [pinupsforpitbullsinc](https://www.facebook.com/pinupsforpitbullsinc). Lots of different ways to find us on social media as well. But preorders definitely help us, and all the funds that come into, if you buy anything on our website, go right back into our mission. So it's a very direct effect.

JASMIN: Where are you based?

DEIRDRE: Now we're in Asheville, North Carolina, but I started it in Philadelphia and I moved to Asheville a year ago and I love it here so much. And we're trying to open a storefront here as well, hopefully in the next six months. So that would be another way for people to be able to get educated.

JASMIN: Excellent. Well, thank you so much for all that you do to change the world for animals. And we're just so excited about this book, and it seems like it's definitely the time for this book to be out there and I'm sure that it's going to be as popular as the issue is becoming because like you said and because of your efforts and the efforts of so many other tireless advocates, people's eyes are opening around pitbull issues. And I think the best advocates are the pitbulls themselves.

DEIRDRE: Absolutely.

JASMIN: So yeah, so thank you, Deirdre, for joining us today on Our Hen House. We really look forward to staying on top of your efforts to change the world.

DEIRDRE: Thank you so much. I really, really, really appreciate it. It's been wonderful.

JASMIN: That was Deirdre "Little Darling" Franklin.