Transcript of **Out of The Woofworks** Episode 10: “Sarah Rodriguez (Umemama Training)”

RACHEL: Welcome back to Out of the Woofworks, here with me, Rachel Forday, on a podcast where we'll be talking about dogs training, and most importantly, human social issues, both in the dog industry and in the world.

Today, we have dog trainer Sarah Rodriguez of Umemama Dog Training here with us. She'll be talking to us about puppies and preventing dog bites and also about their insight and experience as a person whose half of their family is native Hawaiian and half of their family is White. I really enjoyed speaking with Sarah so I hope you’ll enjoy listening to. Let’s get right into it!

[Intro Music]

RACHEL: Hey, Sarah, thank you so much for being here with us today. I'm so excited to be chatting with you. How are you doing?

SARAH: Hi, Rachel. I'm doing well. Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to chat with you.

RACHEL: Ah brilliant. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

SARAH: Sure. So my name is Sarah Rodriguez. I am a KPA-CTP, a Karen Pryor Certified Training Partner, and a Family Paws Parent Educator.

I live in Northern New Mexico, and I am excited to chat with you and just get into everything dog behavior, because I feel like I'm a self-proclaimed behavior geek. I live with two Huskies and I go by the pronouns she/her. I am half native Hawaiian. So the official name of that group of people is Kanaka Maoli. And half of my family is also white. So some of the dynamics of being a part of both of those groups impact how I think about accessibility and positive reinforcement.

RACHEL: Yeah definitely. I love to get into more of that soon, but how did you decide on becoming a dog trainer? Did you always have animals with you or were you always around them?

SARAH: I grew up wanting to be a zookeeper, which is kind of a unique profession. I had a very supportive mother who would take me to the San Francisco zoo quite often. And I just fell in love with the idea of being able to work with and observe animals. I went through another unconventional career path, which is that I am formally trained as a visual artist. I went to UCLA to get a masters in visual art.

RACHEL: Oh wow. That's really cool.

SARAH: There is quite a bit of overlap between visual art and working with dogs, believe it or not. While I was getting my master's, I was very interested in the, some theories around inter-species communication. And I felt like the more I was reading about it, the less likely it was that I would actually interact with animals.

So I ended up having a desire to have more of an applied practice. And I went to the woman who helped me train my first dog. And she suggested a couple of different programs. When I first started doing dog training, I was more of a balanced trainer. So I used a prong collar and some other aversives with my first dog and a few years into dog training, my partner and I rescued a dog that had human directed aggression, and we realized very quickly that what was exacerbating some of these behavior problems was the implementation of some kind of aversive or punishment. So even if we used a verbal, no, this dog would redirect onto our other dog.

RACHEL: Right.

SARAH: So it was a very clear picture in the potential side effects of punishment.

And at that point, I decided to completely reevaluate what I was doing and try to learn more about positive reinforcement. And I went through the Karen Pryor academy thinking when I went into that program that I was a positive reinforcement trainer, but there was

so much for me to learn. So I feel like the Karen Pryor academy is really how I got started thinking about being a dog trainer.

And that's my journey. I'm sure there's lots of other details along the way that I'm leaving out, but-

RACHEL: That's really great. I mean, the dog world is so lucky to have you in it and that you decided in the end to kind of switch over because of that dog and you see the effects of punishment in that really real way.

And I know that you have a new, adorable puppy in your home, and I'm going to be honest and say, I've never lived with a puppy. So how has your life been like with him in your house. Tell us a bit more about him.

SARAH: Sure. So we have a very adorable puppy named Jerry. He is 15 weeks old and he's a Husky. He is the first dog that I've ever gotten from a breeder.

He is... I can't tell if I have a different set of standards because we have previously lived with a dog that had some pretty serious behavior problems, but for us, we're just having a lot of fun and it feels very manageable. And he has really impressed me with his ability to just kind of fit right into our family.

And he is obsessed with other dogs. He loves our other dog, Ume.

RACHEL: Ooh

SARAH: We do some training but the main priority right now for Jerry is just to focus on socialization. So our priority with him is thinking about introducing him to different references that he'll need throughout the rest of his life. And trying not to overwhelm him, being mindful about canine body language and introducing things slowly at a distance.

I definitely have completely re-evaluated how I think about puppy socialization, because there was a time where I just felt like, oh, just bring the dog everywhere. And that's how you do it.

RACHEL: Yeah. That is a lot of people's impression of socialization as well, isn't it?

SARAH: Yes.

RACHEL: And at the moment, have you found that he's nervous or worried about anything?

SARAH: So somewhat typical to his breed, he is a little bit, I would say more neutral around people. And sometimes, I mean, we had a sort of unique experience where someone came over and they crushed a can under their foot and something about that sound made him try to escape. So as soon as he saw that he just ran the other way and I've been trying to see those moments as opportunities and trying to think "thank you for so clearly showing me how you feel about the stimulus and the environment, now we can work on other things that might not be directly the same, but could be related". So some of the things that we do are like even just dropping a spoon on the ground feels valuable in that I'm trying to think about introducing him to the concept of different kinds of novelty and understanding that when there's something new or different in the environment, potentially something that's sudden or alarming, it's just an opportunity for us to do a little bit of training together.

RACHEL: Yeah. And that doors, little noises, they kind of bring good things for him as well. And apart from that, have you been focusing on anything else with him in terms of training?

SARAH: Sure. So one of the things that's really important to me as I've worked with other dogs that have aggression during handling or husbandry procedures, is that he's really comfortable wearing any kind of equipment on his body.

So that could mean a collar or a harness, it also could be related to different grooming procedures since we'll be touching him. And the way that I've been thinking about putting a collar or a harness on him is that when we put a collar on him, it's really a promise. It's a cue that means something that you like is about to come.

So every time I put a collar on my dog, I'm going to give them kibble, something high value, I'm going to reinforce them because I want a collar going around my dog's neck to be a green light for reinforcement.

RACHEL: Yeah, no, I've- I love what you said about it being a promise. And I try to do that with my dog Dave when he puts a harness on, that every time he puts his head through the loop, he'll definitely get one. And sometimes his dad will forget and I woll jump in and hand him a treat anyway, because it is so important and handling procedures can sometimes be something that people overlook or think that dogs are just not going to like the groomer as it's just not going to like the vets and just have the dog tolerated or be frozen in these procedures and that can be quite harmful, can't it?

SARAH: Sure. I mean, I think there's a few different risks involved with putting our dogs in situations where they potentially freeze and response to putting some equipment on them. Obviously, the more extreme, or I guess you could say one end of the spectrum would be that dogs eventually could bite someone.

If we continue to not listen to a dog freezing it could escalate. I like to have some very fluent behaviors for my dog and I was going to say impressive, but I think really what I mean is that there might just be a lot of distance involved. So if I'm recalling my dog from a distance, that could be a pretty difficult behavior.

And I have found that when I keep some level of trust and communication every day with my dog. It's easier for me to do things like recall them from a distance or even to just do some fun tricks. If I need to get some of these really fabulous fluent behaviors, I want to have a baseline of trust.

RACHEL: Yeah. That's really important. And because you have Huskies as well, I've often found in of like social media tiktok and things like that people write off their husky's behavior as being just dramatic and then they don't listen to them, and that erodes the trust, doesn't it? Are there other misconceptions you've noticed people have about huskies?

SARAH: Yes I mean, the huskies being dramatic is a curious reputation. And I don't know if that's just because Huskies can be very vocal and sometimes they will let out vocalizations that to people seem like maybe the reaction is larger than we think it should be based on the given scenario. In my experience, usually those vocalizations are just information that something about the environment is making your dog uncomfortable.

There are lots of other stereotypes about the breed that I think probably at some point have been rooted in something that could potentially be true about the breed, but then sort of maybe got condensed. So that it's easier for us to understand. So one of the ones that we mentioned was that Huskies can be stubborn.

RACHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: In my experience, Huskies are not stubborn, but it might take a little bit more curiosity on the handlers and to figure out what is reinforcing for a particular dog. So a lot of times Huskies are very attuned to the environment, or simply just having access to something outside could be reinforcing.

And it does require some creativity on the handler's end to figure out how to make training sessions, really engaging. The Huskies, uh, you know, they're bred to work in front of the handler. They're not necessarily taking direction while looking at the handler. And so I think when we're breeding for some of those traits, it's going to be a little bit different than working with a Border Collie or a Lab.

But that doesn't mean that there's something wrong with Huskies and that they can't learn through positive reinforcement.

RACHEL: Absolutely, every breed can learn with positive reinforcement. I think that's a really good point there about some of the misconceptions people have. And I mean, almost every breed gets this sort of thing, but I often see that Huskies get the “dramatic” label, put on them a lot. And sometimes that can be quite frustrating to see. But kind of moving on a little bit, many people have struggled with their dogs displaying aggressive behaviors towards them. And then you mentioned this as well. And I think this is increasingly

so, during COVID times, and I've certainly been working with clients who experienced this as well.

Like you say, when the client says “no”, that dog redirects onto them because of that learning history of having a lot of punishment. I know that, of course, this is a topic you're particularly passionate about. So what are the signs that people should look out for when it comes to their puppy, or even adult dog, starting to display behaviors of handler directed aggression. And do you have any tips on preventing it?

SARAH: Yeah, there's a lot that I want to say in response to that question. I would first maybe say that I think we have to be really clear in what we mean when we say aggressive behavior, because sometimes I think that we might all have different definitions of what that means.

RACHEL: Absolutely.

SARAH: So for me, um, I'm always looking at some kind of bite scale. If that's someone like Ian Dunbar's bite scale or just a personal bite scale that I might make on my own, so that I have a frame of record. Usually we're talking about a dog making contact with skin. It could also be lunging and air snapping. I would say typically when a dog is exhibiting these behaviors, they're probably in quite a bit of distress.

They might be really scared. And if we have a dog that has gotten to this place, we really need to back off and think, wow, that my dog is so terrified about whatever is happening in the environment or something that I'm doing to them that they feel like this is the only way to make something stop. Since we are chatting about puppies I do think puppy biting is not aggressive, but it is worth looking at puppy biting because all behavior has a function. So if my puppy is mouthing me or biting me, a lot of people would find that to be a nuisance behavior and they might sort of dismiss it or want to know how to end the behavior immediately.

But there's quite a bit of information within puppy biting. Sometimes puppies might have an upset stomach. Sometimes they might be

bored. They could be teething. But another thing I've found is that sometimes it can be valuable information in terms of handling. So if every time you go to touch your puppy, every time you go to brush your puppy, if they are putting their mouth on your hand, it's not necessarily aggressive, but it might be worth doing a little bit of training so that you can help your puppy, keep their head still when you touch them.

RACHEL: Yeah, for sure.

SARAH: Working on behaviors like that and having a really clear goal of clicking for your dog having their head still when you brush them or when you touch them can be one way to prevent discomfort with some basic handling. That's not going to be true for every single dog, but it could be a part of a socialization plan.

I would say, if we're talking about an adult dog that's coming to your home that has some kind of discomfort around being touched, groomed, vet care... The first stop I would make is to go to a vet to make sure that we're eliminating pain.

RACHEL: Yes.

SARAH: And then I would also encourage someone if they really felt scared about the behavior to reach out to a vet behaviorist.

And then another thing that we can do sort of at the foundation, first step, is become dog aware and learn about canine body language. That's probably going to be the number one tip, I think, for any sort of prevention of behavior. If we can be really fluent at reading canine and body language and notice the more subtle signs I think it can help us prevent a situation that we might be looking to avoid.

RACHEL: Yeah, that's really important.

SARAH: That would be the first step. So I think: going to a vet, maybe seeing a dog behaviorist and then just taking a step back from training with your dog and really educating oneself about canine body language would be my first step.

Beyond that, I think if someone's working with a trainer and they're creating a training plan, some things that I found that have really helped are short sessions, creative reinforcement strategies. So actually having fun with how you reinforce your dog. Maybe you create distance in your training session between where the scariest thing happens and when you feed.

And then even though it seems a little bit counterintuitive, I'm a big fan of teaching dog tricks.

RACHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: And I think it's really fun to intersperse some trick training with the more serious cooperative care work. So can you do a couple of fun tricks over here and then maybe we'll do the cooperative care work over here, then we'll do a couple of fun tricks

Those are some of the things that I utilize with my own clients and with my own dogs.

RACHEL: Yeah. I really love that. And I also use trick training in a different context for the cooperative care, and sometimes people think tricks are not necessary and not important and just for fun or just for impressing people, but actually tere can be a lot of purpose to them.

And like you say, it can be a break or just something that is fun for the dog to do. And then you go into more of the cooperative care, serious stuff. I also really appreciate that. You talked about defining aggressive behaviors a little bit because in the end aggression is like a label and everyone has a different perspective of what aggression is or what an aggressive behavior looks like. So it's really important to just identify what that is: Is the dog biting? was the dog lunging? I think that's a really important point. And sometimes I find that the aggression they evoke can lead people to using harsher methods on their dog.

SARAH: I think it probably is a common belief that a more aggressive dog needs harsher methods.

RACHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: Although I will say in my own experience with some dogs that display the handler directed aggression, the opportunity to use harsh methods is completely eliminated, especially if we're talking about a dog that you can't even put a collar on them, let alone take it off. Maybe there's a dog that had a collar put on when they were a puppy and then it never came off.

Trying to take that off of the dog could be very scary. So how are you going to get an aversive collar on that dog? That's something that I ask myself often when we're talking about dogs that might have a bite history. It just seems so dangerous to me to put myself as a handler in that situation. And I have found that, you know, using positive reinforcement is not only do I feel better in using that training, but the dog generally seems to feel better as well. I wanted to go back to talk about tricks too

RACHEL: Yeah, go on.

SARAH: So for me personally, I think that with dogs that have a bite history, it can really have a huge impact on the human-canine bond. I think that sometimes guardians can become afraid of their dogs and they might not necessarily want to engage in certain opportunities to raise criteria because it could be scary.

RACHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: And so what I have found helpful with dogs that might have a bite history is actually using the mindset. How would I train this if it was a trick? Because it does shift my own mental perspective to thinking, how would I train this if it was just a fun trick? How would I create a shaping plan if we were just learning how to do a play bow? That that kind of lowers the stakes for me, and I think that it shifts my behavior as the handler and the person who's creating the training plan. So if the value in trick training is enormous and huge, and I can't say enough good things about it.

RACHEL: It really is. I really love that you've mentioned that and that's a really good tip for people who may be struggling with these

issues, that training a little bit of trick training and just having fun with your dog. I think that does really build a relationship.

And so shifting gears a little bit towards you and really understanding the person behind Ume and Jerry's leash, because of course this podcast is about understanding more about the human issues in the dog world and particularly uplifting the voices of people that are part of a marginalized community. So if you're comfortable sharing, what has your experience been like as a Kanaka Maoli or indigenous person in the dog world?

SARAH: Sure, so I will say that because I'm mixed race, my experience is that I kind of straddle both worlds and there can be unique challenges when you don't necessarily fit into one group or another, just at first glance, I will say that my own family, everyone always had dogs. The dog culture in Hawaii is a little bit different from what I experience now in that a lot of people use their dogs- they're hunting dogs. So a lot of dogs are bred for like a work purpose. And a lot of times I think that that potentially could be another area where people assume that if you have a hunting dog, you need to use a different set of training skills. And by no means do I think that anyone is actively trying to cause harm to their dogs. But I think that there's just a lot of cultural fog about dogs that are bred for a more working purpose, as opposed to dogs that are bred to be pets that might live in your home.

I think that there are a lot of myths about People of Color and how they take care of dogs or how they raised dogs, and that might be separate or look different from how white people might care for dogs or how white people might raise dogs.

RACHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: My general finding is that that's not true. I do think that there is probably more access for certain groups of people to engage in positive reinforcement training, simply because I think certain groups of people, and this is regardless of race, might find one-on-one training to be cost prohibitive.

So I am a big proponent of people incorporating sliding scale or some kind of low cost option into their business plan. And I think that that's one way to make training more accessible.

RACHEL: Yeah, that's a really good point. And for yourself, like when we look around at our peers in this industry, it's easy to notice that there aren't as many indigenous dog trainers that are in speaking roles or in more visible positions in the organizations, in his industry. And you've mentioned one of the reasons that could be, but what changes do you want to see happen in our industry to better support indigenous dog trainers and owners or other marginalized communities?

SARAH: That's a good question, I think that it's hard to get young people excited about the sciences. Um, and I think that it's hard to get young people to conceive of what a career path could look like. If you were going to study something like animal behavior or anything within the field of science that could help you work with animals.

So I think there's a couple different ways to think about supporting indigenous people within our industry. One definitely is- I don't know how to get this off the ground, but I think, if anyone has an opportunity to work in some sort of mentorship program with kids.

RACHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: I think that's a really good way to get started to help different groups can see what could be possible.

It's definitely one way to get started. I would say for people who are certified, that are looking to support their peers. Um, I often feel like I'm coming to a lot of professional things with the deficit. I don't know if that's how everyone feels, but I do feel as though, in my mind, there are a lot of people in the industry who already have a basic understanding of how to run a business, or maybe they have a basic understanding of how to be a professional.

RACHEL: Right.

SARAH: And I always feel like I, somehow I, at some point I missed some memo on how to be a successful dog trainer. Whether that's true or not, that's kind of the narrative that I have in my own mind. And so sometimes when I see peers who will be sharing that their wait-lists are full and they can accept new clients, I would love to see trainers create some kind of reference list where at least one or two people on that list are People of Color or, you know, maybe are a part of a marginalized group.

Because a lot of people who occupied these positions really could use support from others in our industry that are doing well financially or socially.

RACHEL: Yeah. I absolutely agree with that. And I can relate to a lot of what you said about that deficit. And I feel like, well, I have a dog training school we go to, there's often not a lot of business support, so to speak, you have to kind of find it out yourself. So I know that we start off not knowing a lot of these things. And also, like you said, working with kids and introducing more about dog training, dog behavior, animal behavior with kids. Because I didn't know about any of that when I was a kid, I knew that I loved animals, but I didn't know there were other animal jobs apart from vet and zookeeper. So I only knew of those two things. And sometimes I think God, if I had known sooner, I would have gotten sooner rather than do a whole degree in something else kind of thing. Yeah. And I mean, our cause or, our mission as Force Free or positive reinforcement based dog trainers is largely to help both dogs and people have a better life together and have less suffering in their lives and for dogs to learn in a way that doesn't suppress or hurt them or cause them distress. So sometimes it seems especially hateful to see, oppression or at the very least indifference towards the racism or other issues that people who are Black Indigenous and of the global majority face. And I think that we help more dogs and animals where we help my Indigenous people and others that are marginalized communities.

Sarah: I agree. I mean, I think there definitely should be more conversations about how to, you know, how can I create a service. So that pays me from my time that I can live off of, and also is a rate

that is accessible and something that people within my community can integrate into their weekly or monthly budget.

And I will say that I do feel like at Karen Pryor we had some exposure to how to market yourself, how to create a budget, how to create prices, and something that has been on my mind a lot lately is there is a narrative about how to get good clients or how to get quote, “unicorn clients”. That's something that I see a lot.

And a lot of the suggestions are to raise your prices.

RACHEL: Right.

SARAH: And whenever I see this language around getting good clients, it's hard for me to not think like, who are these quote “unicorn clients” who are these good clients and why is it equated with raising prices? And just to kind of tack on that, I think a lot of the business narrative is raise your prices so that you don't have burnout.

And I think that another thing I've been sensitive to lately is who is telling, or I guess it would be who is telling whom, I'm not sure, but who is the voice that's saying don't get burnout? And who are the people that might not have a choice?

RACHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: Because maybe we have to take more than one job, or maybe there are some things that are inherent within race and class, that would cause a professional to be more prone to get burnout, and it's not something that we can actively avoid.

RACHEL: Yeah. It's not necessarily like changing your clients will fix that.

SARAH: Right. Or, you know, I think that, unfortunately, a lot of people who are a part of marginalized groups might have to take on a more loaded work schedule and that that's not a choice. That's a part of a larger systemic problem.

And to place the responsibility on the individual to avoid burnout, I think could be creating more stress. Did I say that in a way that makes sense?

RACHEL: Yeah, you did. I think it's something that even I haven't considered. I mean, when I think about our rates as people of the global majority or people in marginalized communities, we have to think about being able to survive, for one, and also being accessible, and there are extra pressures there. I mean, I wish that perhaps people who are in a more privileged position could help by being more accessible, have more people in marginalized communities in their reference or referral lists, offer scholarships and things like that.

SARAH: I mean, I think scholarships are one part of the puzzle, but it can't just be about giving people money.

There has to be other incentives and I'm not even sure what those look like yet. And I think as an industry, if we keep having these conversations, that's kind of the only way that we're going to figure this out.

RACHEL: Totally. I mean, we have to talk about it because otherwise we don't even know if there is a problem.

And if we don't know there's a problem, there's no way to fix it. So I think those are really, really good points and something for everyone to think about. For sure. And I wanted to ask if there are any BIPoC trainers or dog guardians listening to this, do you have any like words of wisdom, encouragement, or advice that you would like to share with them?

SARAH: Oh, gosh, I don't know if I have words of encouragement, but I think that what I found is just reaching out and just having banal conversations with people who have maybe had a similar experience to me has probably been one of the more helpful things.

RACHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: I think there are probably more of us than we realize within the positive reinforcement community.

And even just sort of like reaching out and saying “hi” or “hello” to one another, I think could be enough for someone to just feel connected on a day-to-day basis. I don't love everything about social media, but I am really drawn to how it's connected me to others like you, there's just lots of people within our community that I can stay connected to, and even just saying “hi” or “hello”, checking in on one another, I feel like that can be more powerful than we realiz. So just simple steps to staying connected, I think is probably the first step. I guess, if I was going to get some words of encouragement, I would say, um, I do feel like maybe the more we communicate with one another and have these day-to-day conversations, I think that we can create more space for one another.

And I do think that there's more possibility. For people of marginalized groups to take part in some of the roles that might have more visibility. So speaking at a conference or teaching a class on a certain platform that maybe gets a lot of visibility, I feel like. Is momentum to making space for people.

I think that it's just about being connected and I think sharing our experiences.

RACHEL: Yeah. Kind of building a community with each other and sharing these experiences and getting to know what's going on really with each other. I think that's a really good point. That's another reason why I like social media myself.

Sometimes it can be really challenging to look at all of the things, but it's really nice to be able to connect with people like you. And uh, finally, what’s the best way for people who want to get to know more about you and your work to reach out to you?

SARAH: Sure. So I love connecting with people in person. So if you live in or around Northern New Mexico, you can find me in person. You can find me through my Instagram which is @umemamatraining. I also have a website that is ume-mama.earth. And if you have

any questions, I encourage you to find me in either places and we can connect.

RACHEL: Thank you so much. And I will definitely put all of that in the show notes. And thank you again so much for being here with us. I really, really appreciate your insight and your thoughts. You've given us a lot to think about, and I think your care for dogs and for the people around you is really, really powerful and impactful.

And so I hope you know that and that people have learned a lot from you as well. So thank you.

SARAH: Thanks. That's very kind. I'm looking forward to hearing your future conversations.

RACHEL: Oh, thank you so much. Take care, now. Bye

SARAH: Bye.

[Outro Music]

RACHEL: Thank you all so much for listening. As mentioned you can find links and transcriptions in our show notes. If you can't find the link in the description, you can find them on my website, dogat-heart.co.uk/podcasts. If you enjoyed the Podcast and would like to support us in what we're doing, you can buy us a coffee at buy-meacoffee.com/dog at heart. And you can get updates about future guests and episodes on our Instagram @dog_atheart. I'll see you in the next one!