

# 'The Firmest Friend'

Documentary chronicles stories of homeless youth and their dogs.

By CATHERINE LAUGHLIN  
CORRESPONDENT

In the documentary "The Firmest Friend," Jon's gentle blue eyes stare at the camera. He has streaky blond hair that sticks out from beneath his backward-facing baseball cap. An oval metal clasp pierces one ear. The other ear has a small hoop.

Scout, a tawny, muscular pit bull, bearing scars on his head and wearing a scarf and dog pack, sits by his feet. Jon rescued him from a shelter in East Harlem 47 minutes before he was to be euthanized.

Jon is homeless and a heroin addict. He said he usually makes money playing his guitar.

"When I'm running low on dog food, I make sure the money I make goes to his food first. And then after that, I worry about eating," he said.

Jon's story is one of four that filmmaker Andrew Fixell, 30, covers in his 19-minute short about the power of love between two groups of outcasts: homeless youths and pit bulls.

On Saturday, "The Firmest Friend" will be presented at 6 p.m. at P.J. Whelihan's Pub and Restaurant on Route 70 in Cherry Hill in honor of Pit Bull Awareness Month.

In August 2014, Fixell spent a day in Manhattan's Lower East Side at Tompkins Square Park, which has a storied history of being a squatters' hub for young, homeless people.

The homeless, who often clash with local residents, resemble characters in a dystopian movie. Many are alcoholics or drug addicts. Some come from broken homes. A few are mentally ill. All of them are disconnected from mainstream society.

Fixell, who grew up on Long Island, knew about the park's

homeless people. What really intrigued the Brooklyn resident was that several of the 20-somethings who live in the 10-acre park do so with their rescued pit bulls. They even take their dogs with them when they freight-hop or travel across the country on trains.

Fixell offered them food and money in exchange for their stories. Initially, he was cynical.

"I always thought the homeless person with the dog was a ploy, a way to get money. When I was a kid, I had this experience. I remember I offered a homeless guy who had a dog with him a cookie," he said.

Fixell recalled the guy seemed indignant and said he didn't want a cookie but money instead.

But conversely, Fixell learned that these kids really love their dogs. It's a symbiotic relationship. "These dogs are the kids' quasi-families and have helped some of them wean away from drugs," he said.

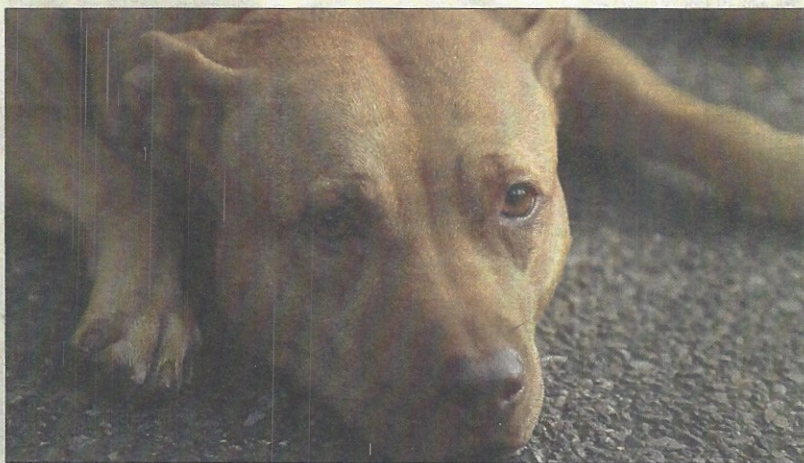
Unfortunately, stigmas continue to abound that all pit bulls are vicious and naturally aggressive. In New York City, half of the dogs placed in shelters are pit bulls. Nearly 60 percent of sheltered pit bulls end up being put down.

Fixell said one of the main reasons the street kids stay out of homeless shelters, even during frigid temperatures, is because their dogs aren't allowed in them.

Shane, another homeless character in the film, barefoot and blanketed with tattoos on his arms and face, said he shares a sleeping bag with Soco, his pit bull.

"This is my family. ... She's my girl," he said.

Kathy McGuire, founder of NJ Aid for Animals, a Cedar Brook-based rescue, reached out to Fixell and coordinated the showing at P.J.



Red is a pit bull owned by a young homeless woman in New York City.

CONTRIBUTED

Whelihan's.

"The film is provocative and evocative. It details the challenges of being young and homeless, and how the kids and their dogs share an exuberance for life together," McGuire said.

Fixell, who is the editor of the online 'zine *epicthings.com*, invested \$10,000 to rent equipment, hire a sound and video team, and edit and market the film. It's being screened at film festivals nationally. Last summer, it won best documentary short and best director at the Chain Film Festival and audience choice at IndieWorks.

"The dogs have fed life back into people who are pretty much lifeless," said Fixell, a self-proclaimed dog lover.

He also said since filming he's worried about what has happened to both the homeless characters and the dogs featured in the film. Their whereabouts are unknown.



CONTRIBUTED  
Filmmaker Andrew Fixell's 19-minute short "The Firmest Friend" is about the power of love between homeless youths and pit bulls.

## If You Go

"The Firmest Friend" will be shown on Saturday, Oct. 15 at P.J. Whelihan's, 1854 E. Marlton Pike, Cherry Hill; 6 p.m. dinner; 7 p.m. film presentation. Q&A with filmmaker Andrew Fixell will follow. Donations of \$10 go to the NJ Aid for Animals.

CONTRIBUTED

Jon, a homeless heroin addict, and his dog Scout, a tawny, muscular pit bull, are in the documentary "The Firmest Friend," being shown in Cherry Hill on Oct. 15. Jon rescued his pet from a shelter in East Harlem 47 minutes before he was to be euthanized. He said he usually makes money playing his guitar.

