

Ready to read? At Lititz library, canine helpers are all ears

PAWS for Reading program pairs young readers with man's best listener.

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - Lititz kindergartner Mara Hessler is just learning how to read. Furry golden retriever Dixie doesn't know how to read at all.

Put the two together and you have PAWS for Reading, a program at Lititz Public Library that partners young new readers with canine listeners that never criticize, judge or get impatient.

Only very rarely will they bark, and usually in approval.

"Max seems to like the penguin story I read to him. He was wagging his tail," said 7-year-old Jenna Walter of

John Beck Elementary School.

She has come to the monthly PAWS for Reading program several times, and has benefited from the quiet, calm setting of reading to a furry friend.

This was the first time Jenna read to Max, a poodle and Eskimo spitz mix with soft brown eyes and curly white fur.

Max is owned by Carol Johnson of Lancaster and is a reading therapy dog with K-PETS, which stands for Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services. Max came from a breeder and his gentle demeanor made him the ideal candidate for the program.

"A dog has to have the right temperament. Then he or she can be trained to be a reading therapy dog," said Marlene Varner of K-PETS.

The therapy dogs live with their owners. And when they are not helping youngsters with their reading, they enjoy playing with their families, eating dog food and other dog things — only they tend to be better behaved than most dogs.

Varner's therapy dog is Tammy, a Shetland sheepdog that looks a lot like Lassie, with long, flowing white, caramel and brown fur. She's much smaller and has an intellectual glint in her eye, as if she really understands what Kissel Hill second-grader Riley Groff is reading to her.

"She looks at me like she knows what I'm saying," said Riley with a smile, as she stroked Tammy's soft fur. "She's a very nice dog, and she pays attention."

Tammy came to Varner through a Shetland sheepdog rescue organization and has been a devoted member of the family ever since.

Dixie, the golden retriever, is owned by Jane Hess of Therapy Dogs International. Dixie was originally from North Carolina, and Hess got her through the Delaware Valley Golden Retriever rescue organization.

"Dixie is just very mellow, loves to sit and listen quietly," said Hess.

According to Karen Tayonk, children's librarian at Lititz Public Library, the program has been held at the library for several years. The young readers benefit from the soothing bond with their animal friends.

The dogs and their owners have been trained to work with the children. On occasion, the dog owners might help a child sound out a word or give them a gentle reading tip, like the difference between a long "i" and a short "i."

Most of the children who participate in the program are younger, in kindergarten through third grade. However, even older children and adults can benefit from reading to a warm, responsive pet.

As Varner explained, reading to a dog helps to calm nervous readers. They also get pleasure from reading out loud to someone who won't criticize. It's a good confidence builder.

As for the dogs, everyone knows they can't read.

"But Max sure looks like he can," said Jenna.

Appointments for PAWS for Reading can be made by calling Lititz Public Library at 626-2255.

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