

Dogs being trained to help teach kids to read in Catskill

By Ariel Zangla

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CATSKILL -- The dog has long been considered man's best friend, providing comfort and unconditional love.

Eight dogs will soon bring those traits to the Catskill Elementary School where they and their human partners will participate in an after-school reading program. Through the program, which is part of the school's Catskill Kids Club, students will be able to practice their reading skills on the dogs. The thought behind the program, which is already being used in the Hudson city school district, is that dogs provide a non-judgmental audience that bolsters the students' confidence and helps enhance their reading skills.

The eight teams are currently undergoing training, which is provided through the non-profit Good Dog Foundation, Catskill Elementary School Principal Dawn Scannapieco said. She said the dogs should be certified by the beginning of April and be able to work with the students.

"The kids are very excited," Scannapieco said. "They can't wait." She said the school district hopes to have a few dogs visit each day and work no more than an hour each with the students. Scannapieco said the Catskill Kids Club serves about 50 students and runs from 3 to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. She said the students do different activities during the club, with the reading portion being one of the revolving programs they can participate in.

Among the eight teams currently undergoing training are Scannapieco and her pug, "Lucy," as well as Assistant Principal Lisa Slutzky and her Chinese crescent, "Louie."

"They're all shapes and sizes," Scannapieco said of the participating dogs. She said there are two springer spaniels, as well as a boxer and a shih tzu among the pack. Scannapieco said the human halves of the teams include a teacher and some community members.

So far Lucy is "doing wonderfully," Scannapieco said. "She's a quiet, gentle dog, but she takes commands very well." She said Louie has also become a star after getting over being intimidated by the larger dogs on the first day of training.

Susan Fireman, executive trainer and program manager for the tri-state area of the Good Dog Foundation, said the non-profit organization trains, certifies, insures and assigns the human and canine teams to do therapy work in various settings. She said she currently has more than 150 volunteer teams in the area and has placed teams in such facilities as Vassar Brothers Medical Center, the Andersen Center for Autism, the Hudson city school district, Columbia Memorial Hospital and various facilities for seniors and individuals with disabilities.

"When they graduate, I place them in a facility that works for the human and the dog," Fireman said of the

volunteer teams. She said each team undergoes 10 to 15 weeks of training and must be recertified annually. Fireman said the Good Dog Foundation, which is based in New York City, also provides lifetime training for any participating dog. Only positive reinforcement is used in the training, she added.

"You can't train a therapy dog with any kind of correction," Fireman said.

Fireman said the training she is doing in Catskill is specifically geared toward the after-school reading program. She said the program is being run in partnership with the Mental Health Association of Columbia and Greene counties.

"It's a very exciting program," Fireman said. She said the students' test scores and skills improve with the dogs' assistance.

Fireman said the Catskill teams are doing well with their training and are learning special behaviors such as hand signals, how to be around walkers and wheelchairs and the "leg safe position," in which the dog goes into a down-stay position between their human partner's legs to avoid being trampled in tight quarters. She said the teams are also learning about working with children and people with disabilities, how to provide emotional support and about privacy laws.

Scannapieco and Fireman both said they would like more people to volunteer for training with their dogs. Fireman said volunteers are always needed and training costs \$470, which includes insurance coverage and placement at a facility where they can perform therapy work. She said the training for the Catskill reading program is being paid for through a grant. Anyone interested in volunteering can contact Fireman at (518) 398-5249 or via e-mail at solanina@aol.com. Fireman said the Good Dog Foundation does offer some scholarships in certain circumstances. She said interested individuals can also apply to volunteer at www.thegooddogfoundation.org.

Scannapieco said in addition to helping the students with their reading skills, the dogs will also build children's empathy and compassion. She said not every child has a pet of their own and the participation of the dogs in the after-school program will teach more than reading.

"The whole relationship between the children and the dogs will help promote other positive things," Scannapieco said.

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