



TIME TO TAKE IT EASY

Therapy Dog Tess Enters Retirement

BY ANGELA ZUMWALT

Special to The Pilot

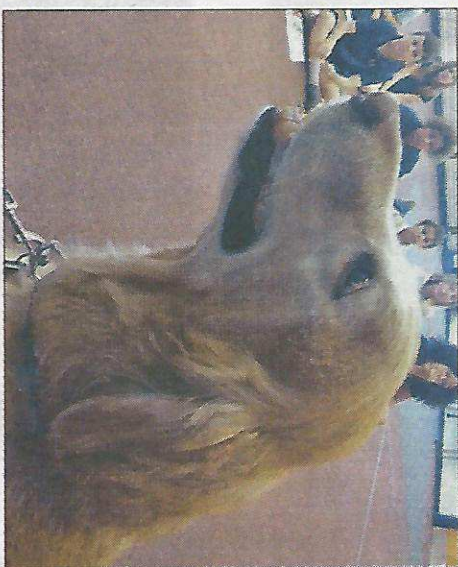
Tess, the therapy dog, lay on her side, totally content and relaxed, next to her handler, Kathy Constantino. It was a quiet afternoon at The Academy of Moore, and the fourth-graders were seated on the floor in the gym, eager to discuss being responsible pet owners.

Tess could no doubt hear, as she had many times before, the Pet Responsibility Committee (PRC) volunteer discussing with the students how they could help their families keep their pets healthy and safe, and also how they could stay safe around pets.

The volunteer, Diane Ingold, motioned to Constantino. On cue, Tess stood up and prepared to do her part.

She walked with her owner to stand in front of the students. Her golden coat shone, and she radiated the calmness and confidence of a well-loved, trained and well-cared-for pet — and that was the strong, unspoken

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANGELA ZUMWALT

Tess on her last school visit, to The Academy of Moore County, with the Pet Responsibility Committee

Tess

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message that was communicated: All pets should be treated this way.

Constantino reinforced the discussions initiated by Ingold, frequently reaching for Tess to demonstrate various points, like where the essential microchip sits between her shoulders, where the rabies tag is on her collar, where flea medication is applied, and so forth. The message was clear: Prevention is the key to sparing pets the pain of heartworms, the discomfort of fleas and ticks, the fatality of rabies, and the tragedy of unwanted litters.

Constantino told the story of how she and Tess ended up together: how Tess was sitting in a shelter where pets were being euthanized to make room for more unwanted pets. Constantino's friend, a volunteer for Solutions for Animals, told her about Tess, and the rest is history. Tess went on to become a certified therapy dog, visiting hospitals and schools, and a "working" dog, trained to bring comfort in disaster situations and during times of loss.

The students earned the privilege of meeting Tess one-on-one by writing down three ways to keep pets healthy, two ways to keep pets safe, and one way to stay safe around pets.

Constantino directed the students to ask if they could pet Tess and then to approach her slowly, letting her sniff their closed hand, and then petting her under her chin. Tess enjoyed sniffing every small hand.

This particular afternoon was a special day for Tess. She is growing older, and arthritis tires her more easily, making it hard for her to stand for long periods of time.

Constantino made a difficult but responsible decision: Tess' school career is coming to a close. This was

her last school visit.

Tess is one of many therapy dogs that tirelessly support the Pet Responsibility Program — dogs like Tess' "sister" Abby, and Bonnie, Max, Tux, Blue, Elvis, DJ, Scout, Barney, Bala, Katana, Greta, Sunny, Lady Curzon, Baily, Bella, Rainy, Harry, George, Gigi, Yankee, Dori and Nori.

"Although, as with all pets, we would love them to be with us in the classroom forever, their time with us is limited, and PRC volunteers have sadly watched many therapy dogs bid the program farewell — among them Fluke, Petey, Devon, Lailey, Molly, Myrtle, Stuben, Bear, Cubby, Chinook, Jasmine, Lexi, Lucy, Farley, Sophie, Nolan, Buddy, Kiera, Cinder and Maggie," says a committee member. "Their presence in the classroom always sends a priceless message, and their impact on young minds and hearts is immeasurable."

Only therapy dogs are permitted in the schools for the Pet Responsibility Program. They have been trained and certified and are insured by therapy dog organizations. Local trainers can provide information about acquiring these credentials. The Pet Responsibility Program welcomes new therapy dog teams.

As the program draws to a close for this school year, the six-week Pet Responsibility Program will have been presented in all fourth-grade classrooms in all Moore County public schools, plus two charter schools and three large private schools. This means the message regarding being responsible pet owners has reached more than 1,200 students in one school year.

Check out www.mcprc.org for more information on the Citizens' Pet Responsibility Committee and its volunteer teaching opportunities with and without therapy dogs.

Angela Zumwalt is the chairwoman of the Moore County Pet Responsibility Committee.