

Local Therapy Dog Teams Extend a Paw From Home

BY ANGELA ZUMWALT

Special to The Pilot

As adults, we can talk with ourselves and our children and come to terms, somewhat, with the situation we're in and why we are having to spend more time at home.

This is not the case with a therapy dog. They always delight in the preparations undertaken before they leave the house on their special assignments. They love the grooming and the pep talks, donning their special collars and bandannas, and watching their owners prepare the bag of supplies and treats that accompanies them. They love hopping in the car and the ride to school. They feel the excitement build.

Then there are the kids: kids everywhere, the smells of candy and Goldfish crackers and crayons and all things kids, followed by the welcomes and the hugs and the excitement that both kids and dogs try hard to contain, as they know they should be calm around each other.

"The dogs sure do miss those days and the special job they had," says a volunteer.

More than 23 therapy dog teams work as volunteers with the Moore County Citizens' Pet Responsibility Committee (PRC) and its associated Reading Tails program.

Before the school doors were



COURTESY OF ANGELA ZUMWALT

Teams from the Pet Responsibility Committee's education program met on Zoom.

abruptly closed, they participated in the six-session Pet Responsibility Education Program for fourth-graders and in the Reading Tails Program. During the education program, they joined the students in the classroom as ambassadors for all dogs. They exemplified a well-cared-for, well-trained and loved dog.

Many of the therapy dog teams also worked with the Reading Tails program, which pairs teams with students who are striving to improve their reading and comprehension skills. Therapy dogs enjoy listening to students read and pass no judgment, offering only silent encouragement

and a wet nose.

Some of the dogs have also been "comfort dogs" during times of stress and crisis at school.

Now they are spending more time at home, the jobs they were trained for on hold. For some, depression has set in. Where are the kids?

In early June, many of the teams joined a Zoom call and shared their sadness at not being able to be in the schools. They brainstormed on how they still might reach out to the students.

The PRC had already placed their education program materials online for students and their families to

access. Christie Hartlove and her dog, Bonnie, added a video to Lesson 4 to add some variety and introduce the students to a therapy dog. The pair also made a video of Christie reading with Bonnie the book "Can I Be Your Dog?" a story of perseverance and resilience.

Since the call, other teams have added videos of book readings. Harlove and Bonnie have added two more and are also working on additional videos for the online lessons.

The books emphasize being kind, respectful and responsible pet owners and making a difference for the animals that share our lives.

The PRC encourages kids and their families to check out the Home Learning Plan, accessible from the home page at www.mcprc.org. Scroll down for the book reading videos and visits with the therapy dogs.

"The dogs look forward to seeing the students again," says a spokesman. "It could be that they are present to provide comfort during a time of transition. It could be that they meet virtually with students who will read to them. They are talking about it among themselves!"

Angela North Zumwalt is the president of the Moore County Citizens' Pet Responsibility Committee.

www.thepilot.com

7/26/2020