

THE PILOT

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COURTESY OF JOHN HARTLOVE

Christie Hartlove with longtime therapy dog Bonnie



COURTESY OF ELAINE WILDERSON

Students at St. John Paul II pet Magic, a miniature horse.

Pet Responsibility Committee Finishes School Year on Hopeful Note

BY ANGELA NORTH ZUMWALT

Special to The Pilot

When Moore County's school doors were abruptly closed back in March 2020, two- and four-legged volunteers from the Moore County Citizens' Pet Responsibility Committee (PRC) were in their 12th year of presenting a six-session pet responsibility education program for fourth-graders.

The PRC moved quickly to provide an online version of the program, complete with videos and an offer to deliver program materials to any participating school.

A highlight of this challenging time was when Tammie Earhart, a Moore County Schools teacher assigned to the fourth- fifth- and sixth-grade Home School "Blend+ed" program, incorporated the program into her students' schedule. She taught it on an in-school day, using the Home Learning Plan page on the PRC website and supplied materials.

Earhart completed the program in early October and wrote, "They absolutely loved it!" and sent photos of the students' pets that they shared during the program. She went a step further and created a Google Classroom for the Pet Responsibility Program, which the school system shared with the principals.

During the tumultuous year for the

principals and the teachers to manage, the PRC did not advocate for inclusion of their online program, but made its existence and willingness to provide materials known.

In the past, the PRC has presented its program to public, private and charter schools. As the school year began to wind down, the PRC reached out to a number of private schools to see if they might be interested in a face-to-face program as a change of pace for their students. Kirsten Hilpert, a teacher at St. John Paul II, enthusiastically accepted the offer.

PRC volunteers presented a five-session program and, aligning with COVID-19 mandate rules, held sessions outside in a tented shelter on the playground.

Each week, a different PRC therapy dog team joined the volunteers, reinforcing the messages being presented. Christie Hartlove brought Bonnie to the first class. They had taught many programs together at the school in the past. Bonnie was being retired, and it was a wonderful way for her to bid farewell.

The following week, Ray Lizzio and Deke, his English Labrador, demonstrated the huge benefits of a well-trained dog as Deke astounded students with his understanding of commands. The next session welcomed

Suzie Wall and therapy dog Beanie, a rescue. Wall led a discussion on pet health and safety issues. During the fourth session, Mary Wood, ably assisted by Remy, discussed how she trained Remy and her other dogs.

The fifth and final session focused on animal advocacy, and a surprise was arranged for the students. Dr. Bri Gindlesperger, an equine veterinarian, her veterinary technician and her miniature horses, Wee One and Magic, arrived on campus. She spoke about caring for pets in general and the difference in caring for a larger animal, like a horse. The students had many questions based on all they had been discussing during the program.

Though the program was different than others that the PRC has presented, the students were serious and completely engaged in each of the five sessions.

"It had been a very tough school year, and the program was a wonderful way to celebrate making it through," says a volunteer.

There are more than 20 Certified Therapy Dog teams that volunteer with the PRC. During the pandemic, they really missed the students and vice versa.

In the fall of 2020, Christie Hartlove reached out to a couple of teachers she had worked with to see if they

would be interested in doing virtual Reading Tails' sessions with her and Bonnie. Both teachers were excited to be able to reconnect and start a virtual program with Hartlove and Bonnie. Reading Tails encourages students who are struggling with reading skills. Dogs are great, non-judgmental listeners. Bonnie and Hartlove were quickly followed by Suzie and Al Wall, with Beanie as a new virtual Reading Tails team.

At the end of May, therapy dog Bonnie, so well-known and loved by students and staff throughout the school community, passed away from cancer. Knowing the time was coming, the Hartloves arranged visits at the schools that knew her best. Christie Hartlove and Bonnie had tirelessly conducted Reading Tails sessions, Pet Responsibility Programs and Bonnie's Buddies (military family support) programs for well over a decade.

While they wait to be reunited with fourth-graders in the schools later this year, PRC volunteers are updating school materials and meeting the needs of pets in our county in other ways that they plan to continue long after the pandemic subsides.

For more information on volunteering with the PRC, go to www.mcprc.org.