

Therapy dog duo cheers up the community

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Meet Ray Lizzio and his therapy dog, Deke. Together, the duo has volunteered for over five years at schools, hospitals, and senior centers. They always have one goal in mind: to cheer up the community.

Are they succeeding? Read on, and you can decide for yourself.

In June 2018, when Deke was 5 1/2 years old, he became a certified therapy dog. "A therapy dog is meant to bring comfort to people in hospitals and schools," Lizzio explains.

Soon after, he began volunteering. "I started at Pinehurst Elementary in February 2019. It'll be five years in February," Lizzio says.

These past years, Lizzio and Deke have volunteered at Pinehurst Elementary School (PES), the Moore County Pet Responsibility Program, FirstHealth, and senior centers around Moore County.

But as Deke has gotten older, he's developed arthritis. Because of that, Lizzio made the hard decision to resign from many of his volunteer obligations.

However, the duo still has a lot of charity to give. Today, they do so at PES, where Deke doesn't have to walk as far or stand up for so long.

"School is safer, and it's less work on Deke, so I'm glad we were able to go back," Lizzio says. "The main thing we do now is Reading Tails at Pinehurst Elementary. That's where we go in, and the kids read to Deke."

“Reading Tails is nonjudgmental reading,” Lizzio says. “The kids read to Deke, and Deke isn’t gonna correct them.” He continues, “Nobody ever formally told me what to do. To this day, I leave it up to the teachers.”

Kids pet, cuddle, and love on Deke while practicing reading, which makes learning fun and stress-free. First-grade teacher Mara Marin says, “Deke brings encouragement to let my kids know that it’s OK to make mistakes. Then they can build up their confidence and become better readers.”

That method seems to be working for him. Marine says when Deke walks in, her students react with pure joy.

“I never heard the word ‘love’ more than when I started taking Deke to school,” smiles Lizzio. “Sometimes directed to me, but usually to Deke.”

But the feeling is mutual. “I love watching the kids reacting to Deke, just loving on him, smiling,” Lizzio says.

Yet, Deke may love it even more than his owner. When Lizzio prepares for his day at PES, Deke is excited. Somehow, Deke just knows where they’re headed. “He knows that word school,” laughs Lizzio.

On top of Reading Tails, Lizzio gives out Deke merch to every student at PES. Paying out of his own pocket, he makes custom magnets and bookmarks for the kids.

Despite his arthritis, Deke has perked up since school restarted this fall. Not only do the kids get a special Deke-day, but Deke and Lizzio get a special kid-day. Although the duo no longer serves other organizations, they continue to make learning fun at PES, wanting to continue as long as possible.

Feature photo: Ray Lizzio, Deke Lizzo, and Pinehurst Elementary students.

~Article and photo by Sandhills Sentinel reporter Andrew Sellers.

