

WEDNESDAY,
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SANDHILLS SCENE

THE PILOT



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Members of the Pet Responsibility Committee and some of their four-footed friends provide hands-on learning experiences for local fourth-graders.

Volunteer-Led Program Benefits The Pets That Share Our Lives

BY ANGELA NORTH ZUMWALT

Special to The Pilot

For the past 18 years, fourth-grade students in public, charter and private schools throughout Moore County have had free access to a Pet Responsibility Program funded and presented by two- and four-legged volunteers from the Moore County Citizens' Pet Responsibility Committee (PRC).

Vass-Lakeview Elementary School served as the pilot school for the program when it began back in 2008. "It marked the start of a wonderful partnership between the staff of the school and the Pet Responsibility Committee to bring a consistently excellent program to the students through experienced professionals who volunteer their time," said Vass-Lakeview Elementary Principal Dr. Michelle Bennett. "The students love the program, viewing it as a kind of rite of passage. They learn life lessons of respect, accountability and responsibility, through the lens of pet ownership. At the same time they are increasing their vocabulary, their comprehension and their writing skills. They also learn about the full array of careers available for those who would like to work with animals. The whole experience is invaluable."

The program is offered over six sessions covering an array of topics about pets

Want to Get Involved?

Are you interested in volunteering or learning more about how you can be part of the Pet Responsibility Committee? Visit the PRC booth at the upcoming Sandhills Dog Fair on Saturday, April 12, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at The Arboretum in Pinehurst.

and pet ownership — emphasizing the responsibility involved — and the costs and long-term commitment that need to be considered. The students also learn about the sad challenge of pet overpopulation, preventing unwanted litters, and how they can help combat the high rate of euthanasia in our county through promoting the spay and neuter of pets in their own extended families and communities. "The main thread of the program is prevention," said a PRC representative. "We emphasize the accountability around prevention and how it provides a better life for pets."

Discussion topics also include preventing fleas, ticks and heartworm and the misery and possible death around those infestations. The program covers the importance of training young dogs, thereby preventing their being relinquished for

behavior issues, and preventing neglect by knowing how to properly care for pets.

Most importantly, the program discusses making responsible decisions about owning a pet in the first place. Can you afford a pet? Is the lifestyle of your family suitable for a pet? What kind of pet is best for your family?

"This decision-making process versus a knee-jerk reaction is a valuable life skill for the students," said the PRC representative.

Although the format and basic messages remain the same, the program content is continually improved and refined. PRC volunteers include retired teachers, child psychologists, veterinarians and business professionals, all providing input to enrich the program. Recently, the program content has been expanded through the inclusion of a "Living with Cats and Dogs Activity Book," which reinforces the messages and goes home with the students once the program is over.

During the program, the students have the opportunity to win a free spay or neuter surgery for their own pet or the pet of someone they know. To win, the students submit a story about a pet needing to be spayed or neutered or the benefits of spaying and neutering in general.

Responsibility

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Westmoore Elementary made the story contest a writing assignment, resulting in 10 winners. For many years, the contest has and continues to be underwritten by The Moore County Kennel Club, an ardent supporter of responsible breeding and pet ownership.

The PRC works with the contest winners' families and the Sandhills Spay and Neuter Clinic to arrange a date for the procedure and a pick-up and drop-off from the school parking lot. Just this month, PRC volunteer Tammy Foster picked up and dropped off seven dogs and five cats in two days.

The Pet Responsibility Program is offered free to the schools, and is funded by local organizations like The Emmanuel Episcopal Thrift Shop, The Moore County Kennel Club and a number of individual generous donors.

Although the program piloted with Vass-Lakeview Elementary, the PRC is grateful to share a similar long-term relationship with many other schools in the county.

One such school is Sandhills Farm Life. When asked about the program, Principal Julie MacPherson said, "Our students light up when the Pet Responsibility team and their dogs step on campus. These volunteers teach our students how to make good decisions regarding animals in a very positive and engaging way. Students share their renewed excitement for caring for their

own pets at home after taking these classes. They gain practical knowledge such as ensuring pets have their required vaccinations, wearing a collar in case they get lost, and being intentional about spending more time with them after school. This program fits with our overall school goals of instilling responsibility and taking ownership for their actions with real world experiences involving pets. I appreciate the Pet Responsibility volunteers taking their time and being committed to teaching our students these important life skills."

This school year, the PRC is aiming to present the program in 14 schools.

"We always welcome new schools to the fold," said a PRC representative. "This past semester we worked with Moore Montessori for the first time. It was a wonderful experience for all involved."

Therapy dogs and their handlers are a key component of the program. Many are with the students for the entire program; others visit during Lesson 3, which focuses on health and safety. These dogs are true ambassadors in the classroom, demonstrating how a dog should be loved, groomed and trained.

The end of the program at each school is celebrated with an assembly featuring a guest speaker who works with animals. The PRC works with local veterinarians and their staff who support the program by coming to speak to the students. They talk with the students about their own very personal journey to become a veterinarian or a veterinary technician. Recently Dr. Tim Boyte, the retired owner of Carthage Animal



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The PRC includes 32 Moore County therapy dog teams, including volunteer Barb Ross and her dogs, pictured above, with West Pine Elementary students.

Hospital, spoke with the students at Highfalls Elementary School. Aided by Fleece, one of the PRC's four-legged volunteers, he showed the students what he looks for during an office visit with a pet and its owner. Then he shared something profound with the students, who hung on his every word. "You are very, very important," he said. "The way you treat and love the pets in your family and the decisions you make determine what kind of life that pet will have. They are totally dependent on you for their happiness."

A life lesson indeed.

For more information, check out the website at www.mcprc.org

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