

On Paw Patrol:

Therapy Dog Has a Knack for the Job

BY LAURA DOUGLASS

Features Editor

Tail a'wagging with a cheerful grin, Levi greets everyone along his path.

"He is charming — Prince Charming — with his looks and that smile. He treats every person like they are his best friend," says owner and handler Kathy McGougan. "He probably likes touch more than any dog I've ever had. He loves to be petted."

Levi was recognized this summer as a "Remarkable Volunteer" by Therapy Dogs International for completing over 250 therapy dog visits. He is a regular at local nursing care facilities and helps local school students through Reading Tails with the Moore County Pet Responsibility program.

"He brightens everybody's day," McGougan adds.

Buddy Led the Way

Every good story begins with a hero. So, for this tale, once upon a time there was a dog named Buddy. He was adopted at 8 weeks old by Kathy and Charlie McGougan.

"He was a Jack Russell terrier and absolutely full of beans," McGougan laughs. "He was full of personality."

McGougan had grown up with all kinds of animals — dogs, cats — "my mother was like Dr. Doolittle. She took in every stray." So this energetic pup was a welcome handful at home. At the time, McGougan was also busy with her career as a reading specialist with Moore County Schools. "That is how this journey began."

Literacy is a fundamental skill for students, and McGougan worked one-on-one or in small groups with children who were struggling with reading. One of the tools she used were books in graduated reading levels. Many were about animals and included photographs.

"A few of my teaching friends suggested that I write a series of books about Buddy because he was so cute. That planted a seed with me," she says.

McGougan took an online course through Sandhills Community College on self-publishing and began writing her first book about Buddy. The stories were written in Buddy's voice and followed his adventures, whether he was visiting a farm or making a new friend. In total, McGougan wrote and published 50 of these reading recovery books.



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Kathy McGougan at home with her therapy dogs, Levi and Lily; at right, Buddy

Therapy Dog

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"The students all would say they wanted to meet Buddy but he couldn't come to school unless he was a therapy dog," McGougan says.

Undaunted, she hired a trainer — and another trainer — who persevered to take this sweet 1-year-old active and mischievous terrier through the 13 required steps to become certified as a therapy dog.

"Every other Friday I'd take him to school and he would sit in a little chair. The kids loved it," McGougan says. Soon Buddy was doing presentations at other schools in Moore County, then other districts in North and South Carolina. "He was a rock star!"

Buddy also began making regular visits to Quail Haven Retirement Village and Pinehurst Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center on Sunday afternoons.

When Buddy was 7 years old, the McGougan family grew again with the addition of Lily. A mixed breed rescue pup, she settled right in at home and on the job.

"You always want a nice dog, and I had in the back of my mind that she

might be a good therapy dog, but you never know. Fortunately she was a very good girl and passed all 13 tests."

And then there were two dogs smiling and wagging their tails as they went on their rounds. Buddy retired from therapy work at 11 years old — after earning the Gold Award, the highest award a pup can receive from Therapy Dogs International, recognizing 500 therapy visits. "Buddy was a once in a lifetime doggy," McGougan says.

Lily carried, continuing to work until she too hit the 11-year milestone and retired. And just like her big brother, Lily also earned the Gold Award for 500 therapy dog visits. Now 13, still full of cuddles, she is living out her "golden years" at home.

'Meant to Be'

It was about six months after the McGougans lost Buddy that Kathy saw an advertisement online that caught her eye.

"I was passing time getting my car serviced and Moore Humane Society had this dog listed for adoption. They had named him Buddy."

More than the name, McGougan says she fell in love with his cheerful smile. This Buddy had been found wandering the streets in Pinebluff and was about 3 to 4 years old.

"He was a good-looking dog and there were many people vying for him. I had to pull out all the stops," McGougan says. "On the application I talked about our two therapy dogs and that I'd written dog books. I told Lily she needed to behave when they came for a home visit."

Fortunately the animal shelter saw the same spark that attracted McGougan and told her they thought this Buddy would be a great candidate for therapy dog training.

"We adopted him in February 2020, right before the pandemic hit," she says.

Renamed Levi, he quickly got to work with a trainer and on his socialization skills. When he was ready to test as a therapy dog, he passed with flying colors in September 2021.

"It is an amazing thing to have three dogs that were all able to become therapy dogs. You can train them but a lot of it is their nature. Buddy was outstanding in so many ways and everyone loves Lily, but Levi is probably the best because he loves his work so much," she says. "He was meant to be a therapy dog."

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