

BOOKS

[SUPPORT]

A little help from a friend

PUP SUPPORTS CHILDREN WHO HAVE DIFFICULTY READING

By SARAH GRIEGO GUZ

Coastside children experiencing challenges while learning to read can now get help from a four-legged friend.

Paws for Tales is a reading-to-dogs program to help children who have a difficult time reading out loud become more confident and self-assured with the skill.

Over the past nine years, Riley the dog has listened to hundreds of children read to him. Riley retired in May. Local resident Jane Kikuchi and her dog Liesel have taken over where Riley left off.

Liesel looks like a wire-haired terrier. Because she was rescued from a shelter, her exact genetic makeup is unknown. But Liesel's aptitude for helping others is well-known and was noticed early in her life when her owner took her to puppy obedience training at the Peninsula Humane Society.

"I started to see how sweet she



PHOTO COURTESY JANE KIKUCHI

Doggy listener Liesel provides support for children struggling to read. Liesel also works as a comfort animal in other settings in the Bay Area.

was and I remembered reading an article in the paper about the use of therapy dogs," said Kikuchi. "I asked the instructor and she steered me in the direction of what needs to happen to be a therapy dog.

"The program at the Humane Society is called pet assisted therapy," said Kikuchi. "They

have a class called 'Canine Good Citizen' that was the first class she needed to get certified in."

During her training, Liesel learned to navigate objects like wheelchairs that she might encounter in a hospital setting.

"You pass that, then there's a behavioral exam that the Humane Society requires," said Ki-

kuchi. "The human has to get a background check and be fingerprinted."

After receiving the required training, Liesel started out working as a comfort animal at a memory loss facility for seniors. She then proceeded to visit drug and alcohol treatment centers as well as schools.

After providing comfort and service all over the Bay Area, Kikuchi is happy to be volunteering close to home.

"I'm very excited to get the Half Moon Bay Library assignment because I live in the country in Half Moon Bay," said Kikuchi. "I also do the Pacifica Library, but that's even a good 45-minute drive."

When working as a doggy listener in the Paws for Tales reading program, Liesel typically sits next to the child who is going to read.

"I'll put a blanket down, she'll sit next to the kid. She's really pretty perfect in this type of role," said Kikuchi. "She's a real licker. Sometimes while they're reading, she'll tickle their hand.

"Liesel knows so many tricks," she continued. "After a child reads to her, I have her thank the child for the reading by doing a trick. It's always a big hit. The kids are so bewildered by the fact that she can do this."

Liesel hasn't mentioned her favorite book.

"More than half of the time, the child will pick out a dog book or an animal book," said Kikuchi. "I'm always amazed at how cute the stories are that kids pick to read to her."

The next Paws for Tales is scheduled from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. on July 25 at the Half Moon Bay Library. Space is limited. Contact the Half Moon Bay Library to register.

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