

Taking a Pawsitive approach

Saturday, January 21, 2006



Molly, a black mixed-breed dog, might not have understood much of what 7-year-old Russell Libby was reading to her, but she was willing to listen.

She lay her fluffy black head on a blanket next to Russell, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor with a book called *High Tide in Hawaii*. "You're picturing yourself relaxing, picturing yourself on a beach, aren't you girl?" said Molly's owner, Sue Banister, who sat on the other side of Russell.

Russell and many other children went to the Jacksonville Golf and Country Club in the west Beaches Jan. 14 to read books to dogs for a fundraising event benefitting Pawsitive Pets, a pet therapy program that is a branch of a national volunteer program called Reading Education Assistance Dogs,

or READ. The READ program aims to improve children's reading and communication skills by having them read to trained and certified dogs. Around the country, hundreds of volunteer READ teams, which consist of owners and their pooches, go into schools, libraries and other settings to work with children.

Program officials said canines are ideal reading companions because they are not judgmental, allow children to read at their own pace and are less intimidating than peers or other human listeners. Also, children with low reading abilities often view reading as a chore and reading to dogs makes it fun.

West Beaches residents Kelly Blackburn and Lucinda Hietbrink founded Pawsitive Pets about a year ago to bring READ to the Jacksonville area. Blackburn's dog, Bailey, and Hietbrink's dog, Lindsey, are part of the program, which has seven certified dogs and three in training. They are growing but still looking to expand. Since the school year began, dog teams have been going into two Jacksonville elementary schools and want to begin serving children in some Beaches schools. They will soon begin working with students at J. Allen Axson Montessori School on Hodges Boulevard. Eventually, with enough volunteer teams, they plan to also serve schools in St. Johns County.

Meg Rohal, a reading specialist at Ramona Elementary on Jacksonville's Westside, said READ has been successful beyond her expectations with some third-graders who last year failed the reading section of the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test. When Pawsitive Pets volunteer Debbie Rose brings her dog, Amanda, a Shetland sheepdog, to Ramona once a week, those children can't wait to read, said Rohal, who attended the fundraiser with her principal, Lisa Brady. And they never miss a day of school when Amanda is there, she said.

"I've monitored their progress since she's been coming since early November and we've seen significant improvement in their reading fluency scores. Even more important, their attitude toward school has greatly improved." Six dog teams attended the fundraiser, where readers brought their own books. With a donation, they received bookmarks, stuffed dogs and had their books "pawtographed," or stamped with the dog's paw print.

When the teams go into schools and libraries, their services are free. Children who participate in the program get to keep the books they read and are also given prizes for reading. It takes about \$5,000 a year to sponsor a team that regularly services a school or library, said Blackburn, who holds fundraisers and applies for grants to offset the costs of the program.

'It made me feel good' Volunteer Linda Tipton of Jacksonville's Northside, who teams with her dog, Maggie, said participating in the READ program is rewarding. She said recently she and Maggie were reading in a library with a little boy with disabilities. "His mother came up and told me he did so well," Tipton said. "He pronounced every word in the book. She said he had never read so well. He was so excited. It made me feel good."

Tipton, who volunteers weekly at Hendricks Elementary School, said Maggie is a natural as a reading companion and seems to sense which students need extra help. "One child, whose father is in Iraq, needs a lot of attention. Maggie knows that," Tipton said. "She spends a lot of time with him. It's just so cute."

"My mom told me I was going to read to a dog," said Taylor, so she said she brought along one of her favorite books about dogs, *The Horrible Trouble with Hally Tosis*. She read the tale about a dog with bad breath to Maggie; then read it to her again.

"What a great idea; kids and pets can relate to each other so well," said Taylor's mom, Catherine Halsema. "Anything to encourage reading -- anything." Each dog at the fundraiser put in a lot of book duty. Even though the fundraiser was scheduled for the morning, kids kept coming in all day so the dogs and their owners stayed, said Blackburn.

Then she read to Heidi, owned by Marilyn Staub of Ponte Vedra Beach, who had recently finished the READ training. *Abi* was Heidi's first reader. "I've always loved dogs," said Staub. "As a retired reading teacher, I've heard about this program for years." She said she thought Heidi, a Keeshond mix that she got at an animal shelter three years ago, would make a good reading dog because she's sweet and loving. "She had to have a very thorough medical checkup and was tested for obedience to see how she reacted to noise and children," Staub said. She passed.

As with the other dogs, Heidi's training was certified by The Delta Society, a national organization that certifies and insures pet-assisted therapy animals. All Pawsitive Pets dogs are therapy animals that also go into nursing homes and assisted living centers to comfort senior citizens. Staub said she has contacted the Ponte Vedra Beach branch library about bringing Heidi there and is scheduled to bring Heidi for a program at the Beaches branch library in April.

Hietbrink said dogs are scheduled to visit libraries around Jacksonville three times a month for the next seven months. Some teams will be visiting a Barnes and Noble bookstore in St. Johns Center off Gate Parkway from 11 a.m. to noon today.

Since the program is growing and Hietbrink and Blackburn see a need for it in schools, they are looking for individual and corporate sponsors as well as more volunteers. All the volunteers and their dogs at the fundraiser got to read with Alex Mairone, 5. When it was his turn to read, he said he wanted to read to all the dogs. So they all gathered around him and he did.