



# BARKING FOR BOOKS



Reading out loud to an audience of your peers can be an intimidating experience — especially when you're stumbling over words and sentences as part the learning process.

But when a child who struggles to read sits down on a blanket in the corner of a library or bookstore with one of the canines from the Tales of Joy R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) program, something magical happens. With an intimate — and pet-able — audience of one, the reader becomes relaxed. Free from judgment, suddenly the words begin to flow.

"The dog is the miracle. I think we're finding a lot of different avenues to work with them and the benefits that they can bring," says Theresa McKinney, who coordinates the Tales of Joy R.E.A.D. program in Rio Rancho. "For the same reason therapy dogs started in hospitals and nursing homes, just their presence is calming, it brings down blood pressure. It takes away some anxiety. When you pet and touch a dog, it's a very real, calming effect on you as a person — whether you're a patient or even just the owner."

The R.E.A.D. program is a national or-

ganization that was founded in 1999, and Tales of Joy is an affiliate of that main program. The gist is simple: Struggling students are able to leave their class to read to a registered therapy dog. Where a large group of children might be unforgiving when mistakes are made, the dogs offer a judgment-free zone. The only other person in the vicinity is the dog's handler/owner.

"They can start to build some confidence, start to build some reading skills, start to come out of their shell a little bit," McKinney says.

"A lot of times when you're sitting right there next to that child and your dog's in the middle, and this child is struggling on a word and you're helping out but not teaching, you'll see that hand go out and just start petting the fur. If they

start to get a little anxious because they're struggling, they just reach out and pet and touch. It's a calming, safe environment. The dog has that unconditional love and that's the whole thing."

McKinney started the New Mexico branch in 2006 with her Yellow Labrador, Jesse, and soon she had students from Rio Rancho Public Schools reading to a whole team of volunteer owners and their dogs. Every dog is registered through the Alliance of Therapy Dogs, which requires a seven-point skills test as well as trial ob-





servations at a medical facility and at a school. The dog and its owner must work in tandem, and it takes a certain type of disposition for the animal to make it into the program.

"Calm, confident, social. They have to like people, like interaction, like being touched," McKinney says. "One of the big things that sometimes can get overlooked is the fact that you actually have to be a team with your dog. You are constantly in tune to each other in any setting, whether it's the school or the nursing home or library or Barnes and Noble. You are constantly working as a team. You're observing the environment, and your dog is constantly looking to you and understands that you're there and (are one of) their advocates as well. When you go through that training process and all the criteria, you've got a pretty good idea of what may stress your dog out."

Everyone in the program works on a voluntary basis. According to McKinney, there are currently 22 active teams, which includes both a dog and its owner/handler. Different teams will meet with teachers at various Rio Rancho schools, and students will be introduced to the animal that will be adopted as a "classroom dog." Of course, every student will want to read to the dog, but the teacher will ultimately decide who needs the most help. In addition to readings at elementary schools, Tales of Joy also makes regular appearances at public libraries and book stores.

There are countless success stories involving students who have benefitted from the program. McKinney recalls how one of her teams was able to break down barriers with a young girl who was a selective mute.

"She had the ability and was able to (speak) in certain settings," McKinney says. "But during school time she chose to be selective mute. She would not speak in the classroom to her teachers or anywhere. However, she would read to her dog. It started off very soft, very whisper voice so that the dog could hear."

Eventually, the handler received permission from the girl and her parents to record one of the sessions. It was a major breakthrough moment.

"That was the first time the teacher had ever heard the student's voice,"

McKinney says of the recording. "It's pretty significant that her comfort level was so strong with that dog that she was able to open up and share that a little bit."

That's par for the course for Tales of Joy. Although she runs the program, McKinney herself remains an active volunteer, as well. While Jesse passed away in 2017, she currently works with two more certified dogs: Doc Holliday, a Golden Retriever, and Nova, a German Shepherd.

"Every time somebody interacts with one of therapy dogs, there's a little miracle that happens there," she says. "I think anyone who owns a dog or any animal, understands the petting and the touching and that human physical bond is miraculous. All of our teams feel very privileged and honored to be able to be a part of a program like this. You just see that miracle. You're just a part of it every time. It's priceless."

—TRISTEN CRITCHFIELD



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