

'Pawsitive' results

Therapy dogs in local schools help kids reduce anxiety, lower blood pressure and build confidence

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When Dominic Payne saw Ruby coming down the hall, everything around him seemed to fade away.

As the black Labrador retriever walked over to him, Dominic tossed down his backpack and dropped to the floor, cupping Ruby's snout in his hands. He gave her a kiss, then wrapped his arms around her whole body in a hug that's best described as utterly heartwarming. Ruby's tail wagged furiously throughout the encounter.

A minute passed before Dominic, a ninth-grade Monroe 2-Orleans BOCES student at Spencerport High School, remembered he was supposed to be getting ready for class. He put his bag and coat into his locker and gave Ruby another pat on the head before heading into the classroom.

Joyous interactions like that are written into Ruby's job description: The 4-year-old became Spencerport's first-ever therapy dog in December.



Breanna Tamburello, 17, a senior, visits last month with Ruby, a 4-year-old black Labrador retriever who is the new therapy dog at Spencerport High School. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Dominic Mayo, a kindergartner at Neil Armstrong School in Gates, lies on the floor to hug Kelsey, the school's therapy dog, before classes start Feb. 4. Kelsey is a Newfoundland. GEORGIE SILVAROLE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Therapy dogs, which are certified and trained to provide comfort in group settings — and are different from service dogs or emotional support dogs — have been shown to offer an array of benefits to students.

two others — Winnie and Charlie — who also come to school with her, depending on the day.

With the dogs being such a normal part of life there, she said she's never felt like they draw attention away

They can reduce test anxiety, lower blood pressure, build confidence and offer love and friendship.

JoAnn Krywy, a school counselor and Ruby's handler, said the positive effects of having Ruby in the building are already evident — especially in the behavior of students with learning disabilities or those struggling with mental health issues.

"I'm getting to interact with students I've never met before," Krywy said. "Some of our students who have struggled and you wouldn't think that they would ever seek out (help) — they now come down and see me."

Standing in the hallway during passing time, she watched as Ruby carried her leash in her mouth over to a student, offering it as a gift in exchange for some petting. Several girls giggled with delight, and one knelt on the floor to give Ruby a quick belly rub.

"From the wagging of her tail to students smiling — it just makes the hallways a happy place," Krywy said. "We knew it was going to be cool, but we didn't know it was going to be this amazing."

Four-legged experts on anxiety and stress

Though Spencerport is new to having Ruby on campus, other schools — from elementary classes to college campuses — in the area have had four-legged staffers for years.

"The comments, over and over again: 'You've made my day, she's just taken away so much stress.' ... It's terribly rewarding," said Kathleen O'Shea, a professor at Monroe Community College and the handler of Gretta, one of the college's two resident therapy dogs.

Gretta, a golden retriever, has a knack for sensing which students are struggling and seeking them out. O'Shea recalled a time when a student suffering from anxiety had bonded with the dog, and how Gretta made sure to comfort her during a test.

"The student was under such anxiety and stress. In the middle of the exam, (Gretta) got up from lying down and went ... to where the girl was sitting, sat in front of her and put her head on her lap," O'Shea said. "It was the most amazing moment. She really does take in the emotions."

For kids in primary school, the interactions are surprisingly similar.

from a lesson or make it harder for students to focus in class.

"For their whole entire school career, at this point they have experienced dogs at every level," Davis said. "Honestly, it is more distracting to the kids when the dog is not there."

Mary Brooks, a sixth-grade teacher and a parent to two kids in the district, said she never would have considered herself a dog person before working at Pal-Mac.

Davis — and her trio of friendly, furry coworkers — changed that.

"To be frank, I was very afraid of dogs. ... Jill and her dogs, and her way of presenting things with her dogs, I can say I have overcome so much of that," Brooks said. "Honestly, the program has done so much for me as a teacher."

Now, four years later, she loves having a dog visit her classroom and interact with her students. And, like O'Shea, Brooks said it's always fascinating when a dog opts to sit with a student who's struggling with something.

"It's been curious to me that the desk that the dog chooses to lay near is that kid that I know needs a little extra love or support," Brooks said. "I definitely feel like it does bring a sense of lightness and joy and all those sorts of things to the district. ... They're a part of that school — they're a part of the family."

New therapy dog certification

Many therapy dogs working in area schools, including Ruby and Kelsey, have been certified through Therapy Dogs International, a volunteer organization with no local hub.

Gail Furst, the lead certified professional dog trainer at Ontario ARC's Pet Connections, evaluated dogs for TDI for years. She felt that the process was impersonal and wanted to create a local solution.

In the last year, Pet Connections began offering its own therapy dog certification program — one that several dogs now working in Rochester-area schools, including Davis' dog Charlie, have graduated from.

Now, Furst is training a dog that will hopefully join Ruby at Spencerport as the district's second therapy dog.

Kelsey, a Newfoundland, has been part of the Neil Armstrong School community for the last four years. Each morning, she greets the school's elementary students as they come in the door.

Some kids stop by just to give her a pat on the head or a hug, while others melt into the floor with her for an impromptu snuggle session. No matter the interaction, Kelsey always wants more attention — and will gently paw at someone for just one more scratch.

Her handler, school social worker Chris Magee, said Kelsey encourages kids to be “pawsitive,” especially when it comes to learning reading skills. Pictures of students reading to Kelsey are posted on the wall outside Magee's office — an activity that both encourages struggling readers and serves as a reward for interest in literacy.

At Palmyra-Macedon Central School District, in Wayne County, therapy dogs have been integrated into the district's culture for more than a decade.

Some high schoolers, if they've been at Pal-Mac since elementary school, have never experienced school without a therapy dog. The dogs star in school plays, have their own ID cards and have written picture books about their work. One dog even has a question-and-answer column titled “Ask Charlie.”

Jill Davis, a vocal music teacher at Palmyra-Macedon High School, has been bringing her therapy dog Katie to the school for nearly 10 years. She has

Jen Davin, a school social worker who worked with Krywy to bring the therapy dog program to Spencerport, is optimistic that her dog Ellie will be welcomed with open arms when she receives her certification. Seeing how well students and staff have responded to Ruby is encouraging, she said, and she's eager to see the therapy dog program grow.

“We started this program because we knew the benefits of therapy dogs in schools,” Davin said. “We knew it was going to be great, but it makes you wonder why you didn't do it sooner.”

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Dominic Payne, a ninth-grader at Monroe 2 BOCES at Spencerport High, greets Ruby. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

“From the wagging of her tail to students smiling — it just makes the hallways a happy place,” says JoAnn Krywy, a school counselor and Ruby's handler. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE