

Fox Valley Therapy Dogs

Reading goes to the dogs

By Lisa Welz

Reading has gone to the dogs- the Fox Valley Therapy Dogs that is.

Buddy, Lucy, Elijah, and Fritz listened as children read them several different books at the Yorkville Public Library on Saturday, from a toddler's typical board book to "May I Pet Your Dog" and Shel Silverstein's "Where the Sidewalk Ends."

The third Saturday of each month will find children of all ages skipping through the library to the meeting area where their furry friends wait. It's hard to tell who enjoys it most, the child who reads and strokes the dog's fur at the same time, the dog who creeps just a bit closer or closes his eyes in satisfaction, or the dog's owner and handler who guides new readers and monitors the dog.

Reading to a dog may seem a silly thing for some adults. But for children who don't have a pet or who are intimidated by reading to an adult, a dog is non-judgmental, patient, and loving.

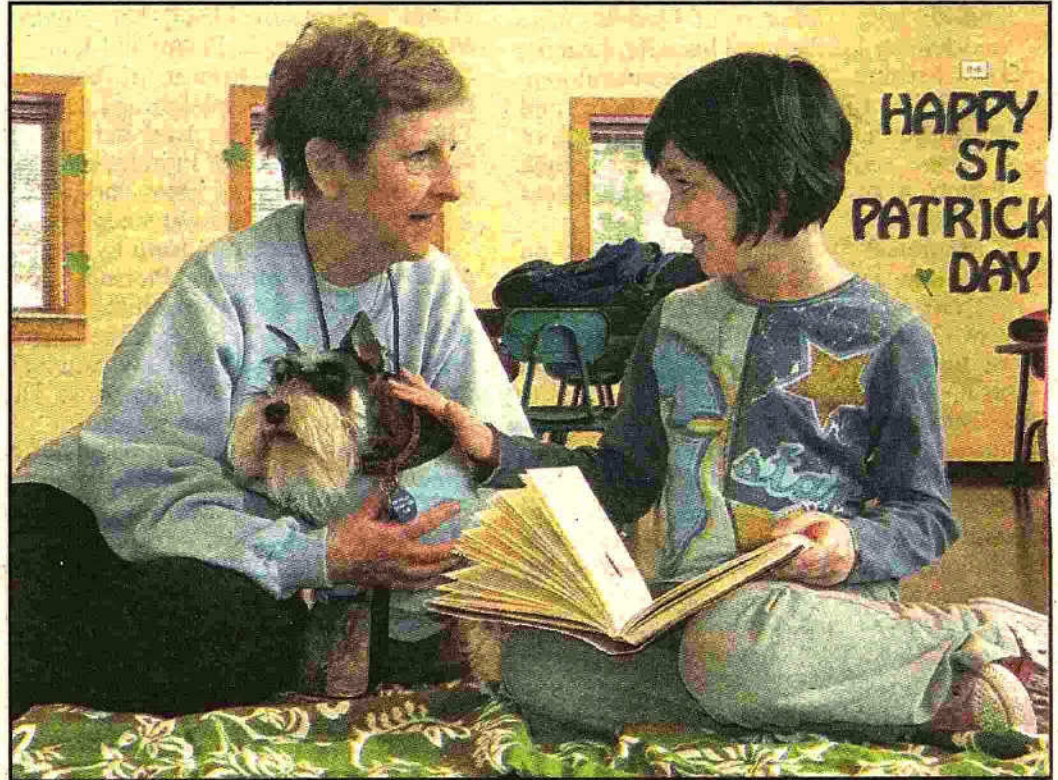
In promoting the program, the library states that it "helps to improve reading scores and makes children more confident readers." Not that the children care about that, of course. All they see are furry dogs who seems to welcome their attention and don't correct them if they make a mistake. Sometimes a dog will even put its paw on a book page as if encouraging the reader to continue.

For Alicia Washburn of Yorkville, being part of the program can be emotional. Due to her allergies, her family cannot have a dog, even though it's something her two girls, Katie, 10, and Jenna, 7, would love.

Coming to the library, something they have done before, gives them an opportunity to spend time with the animals. Looking on from the far side of the room, Washburn choked up a bit and said, "It's just so sweet to see them with the pets. They like to bring dog books to read to them."

She laughed at the Dr. Seuss book "Cat in the Hat" which was tucked under another volume. "I told them they might not like a cat book."

Jenna said she wasn't too sure if the dogs understood her, but that didn't matter. She said, "I like reading books and I like dogs" and, for her, that was enough. Katie added, "I like how you



In the top photo, Carol Bennett with her dog Fritz.

get to pet the dogs. They're very friendly and I really like Beagles so it was really great to read to one and pet one."

Buddy, the dog Katie read to, made a bit of a howling noise and she thought that meant he was happy and liked being read to. His owner and handler, Sue Schumann, said that wasn't too far off the mark, that it's his way of asking to be petted, for attention.

This isn't the first time Jenna has spent time with a therapy dog. Washburn said a year and a half ago, her daughter was diagnosed with Type I Diabetes and while in the hospital the therapy dogs paid her a visit.

"She was still feeling awful and still hooked up to everything and when they brought the therapy dogs in, she was petting them and so happy."

Buddy, Schumann said, is a dog many relate to. He had a leg amputated due to a run-in with a barbed wire fence before she fostered him. His disability

doesn't stop him though; he gets around without any trouble and it seems everyone falls in love with the dog with the droopy ears.

On a different blanket, Alexia Prochaska read a board book to Lucy, a four-year-old Pekinese. Her mother, Ashley Prochaska, said the active two-year-old has come to the toddler time program before but this was her first time reading to the dogs in her own way.

"She loves dogs," Prochaska said as Leslie Butler, the dog's owner and handler looked on, watching as Alexia gave Lucy a hug. Lucy, recently licensed as a therapy dog, seemed to be enjoying the visit too and was remarkably calm as the toddler next to her was moving all around.

"I run a daycare out of my house," Butler, an Oswego resident, said, "So she is used to being grabbed and pulled. She's got a great temperament." In fact, she said when she took Lucy to her first vet appointment, they had suggested she

be a therapy dog, something Butler didn't have time to do until now.

Yorkville residents Brian and Eleni Filippi came with their daughters, Jazmin, 7, and Jozelle, 5, because, Eleni said, "When Jazmin saw the sign, she said I have to do that. She loves animals; anything animal and she's all over it."

Jazmin, Eleni said, had just watched the Westminster Dog Show and as they were walking in whispered to her mom, "That's a Sheltie and that's a

Schnauzer." The family had two dogs, she shared, but said both had died about a year ago. "And that was hard on the girls."

The morning meant so much to Jazmin that Eleni said she was reading out loud to them "To make sure she could read it the right way for the dog." She even wanted to memorize the book, but didn't have enough time. "This is a huge deal for her. She has been signed



up for weeks and was the first one on the list."

Carol Bennett is the owner and handler of Fritz, a Schnauzer, who enjoyed having Jazmin read to him. "Fritz is one of the youngest therapy dogs at 17 months old," Bennett said. "She seems to really like to listen to the kids. Of course all of our dogs consider this work, but they know they are going to get attention so they like coming...when I say we're going to work, she knows and goes and sits by the door."

Bennett said she got into therapy dog work because of a time three years ago when she was in the hospital at Rush-Copley and the therapy dogs paid her a visit. When she decided to get a dog, she intentionally looked for one who would be a good therapy dog.

"So this is my payback. Every day I looked forward to them coming and they made me smile," she said. "Everywhere we go, she makes everyone smile. It is the most rewarding thing; it is just wonderful."

Matthew Baker, 8, of Yorkville, came with his sister, Jamie Baker, for the first time reading to the dogs. He was excited, she said, because he loves to read. "He likes animals, but we don't have a dog," she said. A quiet boy, he read to each of the dogs and said while he loved dogs, especially Golden Retrievers, he was happy with the dogs that were there to listen to him.

One of the dogs he read to was Elijah, a Sheltie who was there with his owner and handler. Elijah has been a therapy dog for four months, thanks to Logan and his mom Nicole. Logan had experienced the therapy dogs at school and had begged Nicole to have Elijah trained as a therapy dog.



"I love to do it," Nicole said, adding that they go to a lot of nursing homes and find the responses from residents to be rewarding. Often they are able to comfort someone who used to have animals of their own and now cannot due to living there.

Therapy dogs, Schumann said, have to be a year old and can be purebred or a mix.

In addition to the library, they visit hospitals, schools, older adult homes, and other community organizations.