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Tank completely relaxed with Annabelle Cobb.



Kooper Perry reads a story he wrote to Cynthia Dougherty's dog Bruno.



Oliver Oljaca reads with Snowball, a Pomeranian.

making a difference

By Katherine Ponder, Estate Life editor

BIG (AND SMALL) DOGS ON CAMPUS

Rebecca Harper has a calling. Then she put out a calling and was answered by a lot of barking.

Let's back up. Ms. Harper is a first-grade teacher at Lovejoy Elementary in Lovejoy ISD. She also loves dogs and has seen first-hand how dogs can help people in stressful situations.

"My dad had Alzheimer's, and he wasn't talking anymore," she recalled. "He'd been a veterinarian ... I took my lab, Lake, to visit him one day, and my dad looked down at his side, patted Lake's head and said, 'Now that's a good dog.' It was the first time he'd spoken in a long time!" Lake was Rebecca's fur bambino, who lived a great dog life to the age of 14. She keeps a beloved picture of Lake at school.

Ms. Harper had taught previously in South Carolina and outside of Austin, where she saw "reading dogs" in action. She saw the effects on kids and really wanted to start a program at her new school. Three years ago, she reached out to her principal, Wendy Craft, and was met with immediate support. Together they went to the superintendent, who also gave his approval.

After that, Ms. Harper drafted a letter to parents to explain the program and

allow them to opt-in their children if they wanted. Some kids have allergies, and some are reluctant to be around dogs. Often, those who are a little concerned at first end up wanting to be with the dogs once they see how calm the various canines are. For those kids who have allergies, the dogs are kept out of the classroom. They're set up in an outside room where kids can come in to read to the dogs.

"I met Judy Price three years ago," explained Ms. Harper. "She was with Heart of Texas Therapy Dogs, and they're trained and screened for exactly this sort of thing."

Judy, a Lucas resident, and several of her compatriots were ready and eager to step in. Every dog is trained and certified through the Alliance of Therapy Dogs. They must be calm and friendly around people and dogs. Their handlers are trained as well in how to make minor corrections, to work with people, to "suit up" their dogs in the special collar and badges, and to prepare (a doggie bath every time!).

The Reading Dogs program has been very successful at Lovejoy. "It really improves kids' confidence and fluency," reported Ms. Harper. "They can pick whatever book they want to read to the dogs. It also instills a joy of reading. They're learning without realizing it."

There are eight dogs, both big and small, that visit Lovejoy with their handlers. The canines get comfy and wait for the parade of kids to come to them. The interactions are precious. Some kids bound right up, book in hand, and sit down to read. Others come over shyly, a little reticent. But they gradually

scoot closer to their canine reading buddy, and, even if it's in a soft voice, they're reading!

A child who isn't verbal found "white and black dog" on her "talker" over and over again. While she didn't sit down directly with a dog, she hovered nearby looking for the right words. "She doesn't even like dogs!" her teacher exclaimed.

The handlers see how much their work helps. "She knows who needs her most," said Karen Campbell, owner of black and brown Cocker Spaniel Coco, as her dog cuddles up quietly to a shy reader.

"He loves it," said Cynthia Dougherty, about her lab Bruno, who even sports a dog tie for his days at the reading program.

The kids seem to love it, too, as each student gladly takes a turn with the dogs. For their part, there's no judgment by the dogs. They relax and enjoy the kids, and will take whatever pats, scratches, and stories the kids want to share.

Ms. Harper looks on and said, "I want to create good memories for my students."