

Dogs Who Teach

By Barbara Axel and Ashley Gould

Registered Therapy Dogs and their owners volunteer for a number of different activities. Most people think of Therapy Dogs visiting nursing homes and hospitals to bring cheer. But Therapy Dogs are also utilized in other ways not as well publicized. One such nation-wide program is “Reading to Dogs.” This program has been initiated to help children enhance their reading skills in an environment that is safe and conducive to self-esteem. Children who are hesitant to read aloud before a group of their peers and adults become more responsive and skillful as each individualized dog-read session progresses.



Brevard Elementary School third grader, nine year old Roxana Jose Antonio, reads to a dachshund.

A “Read to Dog” pilot program has started this school year in a Western North Carolina community sponsored by 21st Century Community Learning Center, a program of Communities in Schools of Transylvania County, at their Brevard Elementary School location. 21st Century Community Learning Center offers children in grades two through eight an opportunity to learn the skills needed to be successful students. The organization helps boys and girls discover new ways to explore the arts, science, math, reading, life skills, and culture through fun and educational activities.

The program selects students whose needs are greatest, and can be met by offering them intensive tutoring and homework help.

Only well-groomed, veterinary checked, healthy dogs of the most stable temperaments should be active in these endeavors. The dogs must go through rigorous training, then are tested by experienced evaluators before being registered with one of three national registries. The dogs are rechecked annually. Dogs people smile at and can't resist approaching are the same ones who inspire the confidence and trust children need to enhance their read-aloud skills.



Therapy dogs are required to be on leash and wear these ID tags while working.

Small dogs are cuddled, and large ones are often used as pillows when children read. Before the reading program began in Transylvania County, dogs and students were introduced to one another at a preliminary group program. The students learned about care, training, and the way to approach and pet a dog at home and away, always under the supervision of an adult.



Center: Ch Summer, CGC, ROM, with daughter Ch. Music on left, and daughter Ch. Mischief on right

Barbara and Joel Axel, and three of their longhaired dachshunds are volunteers in the current 21st Century Community Learning Center program. The Axels, grandparents who have presented programs with dogs of their breeding to children since their own daughter and son were in elementary school, are well qualified. They have taught obedience classes, given seminars, and written articles concerning dogs that have been published in local, national, and international magazines. They have handled twelve generations of their own dachshunds to conformation and performance titles here and abroad.

Transylvania County Library Children's Department is planning to continue the Read to Dogs program during summer vacation.