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Paws to Read puts readers at ease *Volunteers bring therapy animals to libraries to help young readers*

By Casey Merkwan
Assistant Editor

Last weekend the Westonka Library in Mound welcomed a few new furry friends - three therapy dogs.

The dogs came in as part of the Paws to Read program at the library. Westonka Library has been hosting the Paws to Read program for a number of years.

Volunteers from North Star Therapy Animals bring in therapy animals to libraries around the metro to help put young readers at ease. Therapy animals include dogs, cats, Guinea pigs and rabbits.

"It's a proven fact that when a child reads to an animal, their blood pressure drops," Linda Frey, president of NSTA, said. "The animal is a non-judgmental entity. They don't care if the child reads fast or slow, soft or loud."



The 'Paws to Read' program is held for children as a way to get reluctant readers more comfortable reading aloud. FILE PHOTO: Mark Trockman

Volunteers at NSTA take a specific class to learn how to help young readers while utilizing therapy-trained animals. The class is a one-day, five-hour class.

Typically the child will be isolated from their parents so they can work with just the animal and volunteer. The volunteer may ask the child questions about what they've read, but in a way where the child would have to explain it to the dog.

"We do little things like, 'Murphy [Frey's dog] doesn't know what that word means, could you explain it to Murphy what the word means?' and then the child gets to be the teacher. And if the child doesn't know what the word means, we can work on it together," Frey said.

Westonka Librarian Amy Parenteau said the Paws to Read program has been very popular with children and parents.

Typically volunteers bring in two to three animals, usually dogs, and children sign up for 15-minute slots to read to the animal. The program is offered a couple of times a year.

"A lot of children are very shy about reading, and it's been really good for reluctant readers," Parenteau said. "It makes them more comfortable, because reading out loud can be kind of scary and they're worried they're going to make a mistake. But when you read to an animal, who's just totally adoring and full of unconditional love, it doesn't matter and some children just find that really comforting and rewarding."

The idea of children reading out loud to animals began with the Inner Mountain Therapy Animal Group in Utah in 1999, according to Frey.

"They started the Reading Education Assistance Dogs program, or the READ program. It's been growing across the country since 1999, and it's actually expanded into foreign countries as well," Frey said.

Over the years, Frey said the program has become very popular.

"I've seen so many good things about the Paws to Read program. The libraries enjoy it and the kids seem to really enjoy it," she said.

Parenteau said the program is unique and brings in a lot of interest to Westonka Library every year. The most recent Paws to Read event was held at Westonka Library on Dec. 7.

"It's a form of reading therapy," Parenteau said. "Everybody looks forward to it and there's a lot of demand."

The NSTA program is volunteer-run. Animals also visit schools, hospitals, assisted living facilities for seniors, the Ronald McDonald House in Minneapolis and more.

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