

Central Bucks elementary school students find dogs make great reading buddies

By Peg Quann Staff writer | Posted: Monday, June 15, 2015 5:22 pm

Hugging a live tail-wagging dog does wonders for people in stressful situations, Diane Smith has learned.

It's especially good for children who naturally gravitate to furry friends.

Smith, the founder of Roxy Reading Therapy Dogs, learned this when she took her puppy to her child's school one day in 2005 as part of therapy training for the dog.

A few years previously, she had visited her grandmother, who had dementia, in a nursing home and saw how she reacted when a therapy dog came into the room.

"Suddenly, she sort of came back to be herself. She was in the moment. It made an impact," Smith said.

So when her family got a Boykin spaniel puppy a couple of years later, Smith decided to train the pup — named Roxy — to be a therapy dog because the breed is calm and likes to be with people. But first she had to socialize Roxy, so Smith took her to Gayman Elementary School in Plumstead where her child was a student.

"The kids started looking forward to seeing her," Smith said. They started reading to the dog, and learning support teacher Sandra Berkstresser noticed they started to become better readers.

"I've worked with Diane for 10 years. It really does help the kids," said Berkstresser. "You can see their whole bodies relax. The dog is non-judgmental. She doesn't care if they make a mistake."

Smith said other teachers soon began requesting a dog to come to their classes, so she recruited other owner-dog teams to visit. But only after the dogs received training and the owners received the necessary clearances to work with children. Now the program serves approximately 1,500 children a week in the Central Bucks School District.

In Berkstresser's classroom Friday, Roxy settled on the floor as a group of children began reading to her.



Amelia Trabachino, 8 reads to Roxy the Reading Dog at Gayman Elementary School Friday June 12, 2015 in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. (Photo by William Thomas Cain/Cain Images)

“Because it’s fun,” Jeff Romero, 8, said, when asked why they liked having the dog there.

Amelia Travachino, 8, liked Roxy’s calm demeanor and that she is a real animal.

“Because dogs like to snuggle when you read to them,” John DiGiovanni, also 8, added.

Now there are 67 therapy dogs associated with the Roxy program, a nonprofit that also takes dogs to the Bucks County Justice Center to be with children who must testify as victims of abuse or who are the subject of dependency hearings to determine who they will live with if their parents can’t care for them.

“The judges love it,” Smith said, noting that Judge Robert Mellon set up the program. Having a dog nearby can help a child who must testify about a crime. The dogs help the children “access emotions,” which Smith said is good for the children. The dogs are involved in approximately 300 court cases a year.

The dog owners involved in the court program also receive additional training from NOVA, the Network of Victim Assistance.

“They affect everyone they come in contact with ... in a positive way,” one courthouse staffer stated on the Roxy Reading Therapy Dogs website.

Since Doylestown Hospital recently opened a pediatric unit, the dogs visit children there and at Pedia Manor, a treatment center in Plumstead for children on ventilators, Smith said.

The organization recently received commendations from both Central Bucks School District and the Village Improvement Association of Doylestown.

Smith said the organization has a constant need for therapy dogs and handlers but also needs volunteers who can raise funds for insurance and vests the dogs wear on their outings, as well as for Roxy-look-alike stuffed animals given to children in court cases.

“We need funds to sustain this,” she said.

For more information on the program, visit <http://roxyreading.org>.