

Canton



Left: Mike Grossi's R.E.A.D. dog Oola reads with a young girl during a visit to the Plainville Library. Right: Grossi's three R.E.A.D. dogs, Bumbelina, Oola and Ollie

Submitted photos

Tails will wag at the Canton Library

Reading education assistance dogs from Tails of Joy, Inc. will provide a captive, loving audience for young readers

By Abigail Albair
Editor

For a kid, reading out loud can be scary.

Many adults have memories of standing tongue-tied and horrified before a group of peers as they tried desperately to sound out every word.

Kids today are finding captive, loving audiences to practice reading in front of in dogs.

"This is great for children who are school-aged but not old enough to be in full-book discussions," said Heather Baker, Canton children's librarian. "Kids aren't shy about reading to dogs. Dogs aren't critical."

Tails of Joy, Inc. will bring R.E.A.D. (reading education assistance dogs) therapy dogs to visit the Canton Library on Feb. 27 to provide kids ages 5 to 10 a canine friend to read to.

Tails of Joy is an affiliate group of a national therapy dog society, the Delta Society, with close to 100 members that make regular pet therapy visits to nursing homes and hospitals.

According to dog handler and Tails of Joy member Mike Grossi, about 25 of the organization's members are R.E.A.D. certified.

Grossi will bring two of his three R.E.A.D. dogs, Bernese mountain dogs Oola and Ollie to the Canton Library. His Rottweiler Bumbelina is also a therapy dog.

Grossi explained that R.E.A.D. dogs "have to be able to be calm and lay there for an hour and a half with different kids using them for a pillow, playing with their fur, touching noses with them and other situational things. The dogs must be patient and let the kids hug and touch them."

He added, "If you're lucky enough, you can get a dog that's a little bit animated."

Animals have many therapeutic benefits, in addition to reading assistance, so before a dog becomes a R.E.A.D. dog, it must be certified as a therapy dog.

To become a therapy dog, the animals go through two eight-week courses which involve different obedience and situational training.

"They learn about different situations they will encounter in hospitals and nursing homes and how they need to react. We go into serious places to do this work. A lot of people in the hospitals we go into will never leave. They have all kinds of

stuff hooked to them so the dogs need to know how to get themselves around all the equipment and get their head on the bed without disturbing anything," explained Grossi.

He added, "Just being able to pet the dog gives these people a little bit of a smile."

In addition to basic obedience, the dogs also go on practical field trips where they learn how to maneuver around walkers, wheelchairs and IV poles.

To become R.E.A.D. certified, the dogs take an additional course.

"I've seen the result of all the training which is that the dog sits calmly and is attentive to the child. They don't try to play during the reading time, but

they don't go to sleep either. Compared to your average dog, they're much calmer. They aren't afraid of being touched or of children looking them right in their faces," Baker said.

Grossi explained that there are two ways of utilizing a R.E.A.D. dog.

"We either go into schools, which is a more documented process where the kids are kept track of to see how they are progressing as the dogs are with them. The other way is the libraries where we go once or twice a year," Grossi said.

The handlers stay with the dogs, who are always freshly groomed before their visit, during the R.E.A.D. program. Blankets are put down for the

dogs and the teams of handlers and dogs spread out around the room. Each child has 15 minutes to read one-on-one with the dog.

Children get a certificate upon completion.

R.E.A.D. was created by Intermountain Therapy Animals in Salt Lake City, Utah.

The program at Canton Library is free, but registration is required. The animals are well-groomed prior to their visit, but children with severe asthma or allergies may not find the experience enjoyable. For more information call 860-693-5800 or visit www.cantonpubliclibrary.org

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