

Local Schools



TOP

Therapy Dogs Continue to be Utilized Throughout School System

SEPTEMBER 29TH 2020 BY DEE LOFLIN

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Poplar Bluff, MO - A chocolate Lab, certified as a professional therapy dog, recently served to help get apprehensive new students through the classroom door during the first day of school at the Poplar Bluff Early Childhood Center.

Handled by Michelle Caswell, who teaches 3-year-olds in an integrated classroom, Hope is the latest in a tradition of service animals that have been utilized in various ways throughout the R-I district to provide a calming effect on students.

Donated by dog breeders Dave and Rhonda Bishop of Ellsinore in mid-2018, Hope completed her obedience classes through K9 Biz in Dexter and later passed her public access test through SEMO Dog Trainers in Poplar Bluff.

“In dog training, they train you and you train the dog,” Caswell explained. According to Caswell, Hope already helped forewarn of a seizure a student had suffered during a homebound visit before a hospice nurse was able to come to the boy’s aid. “That [act] alone was worth the two-year wait,” she noted.

Since the 2018/19 school year, Oak Grove Elementary has served as the second home of a Great Dane named Bailey, age 6, who resource teacher Holly Shupe has incorporated into her special education classroom. Beginning in 2012, Junior High counselor Luann Elledge also had a therapy dog named Creggan, an Irish setter now retired, and Lake Road counselor Valerie Duncan owned a Labrador retriever named Aerial, who unfortunately

died almost a year ago.

Jenn Nicolini, a Junior High teacher, is scheduled to travel with Elledge to Concordia, Kan., next week to pick up Creggan's successor from Canine Assistance Rehabilitation Education & Services. Several civic organizations, banks, veterinarian offices and other businesses contributed so Nicolini can obtain the weeklong training through the prison reform program, and cover the ancillary costs.

"My goal would be to see every school have a therapy dog to help kids dealing with trauma," Nicolini stated. She recently earned her psychological examiner certificate and specialist degree in counseling through Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau.

Earlier this month, Duncan was once again placed on the CARES waiting list, a process that can take one to two years. She has plans to fundraise to offset the training expense, as handlers are responsible for providing liability insurance, as well as food and veterinarian care for the pet. When Aerial passed away, Duncan said students flooded her office with letters and mementos paying tribute to the beloved dog.

"I didn't realize she meant so much until I saw all of that," recalled Duncan, adding that she felt 'overwhelmed' by the outpouring. "A lot of times kids would come into my office, and they didn't want to talk to me, they wanted to sit down and talk to her."

Back in 2004, Junior High counselor Cindy Jackson, then employed at Lake Road, had perhaps the district's first school dog—Eddie, a Bichon/poodle mix—before obtaining certification was required by the Board of Education, she said.

"Since the early 2000s, Poplar Bluff has been a school district that believes in creating a safe, welcoming place for children" through the use of office pets, Jackson commented. "Dogs lighten children's spirits, and provide that unconditional acceptance."

Pictured: Hope, a 2-year-old professional therapy dog, stands in the hallway greeting families on Wednesday, Aug. 26, at the Early Childhood Center.

Article and photos submitted by Tim Krakowiak, Communications/Marketing Director, Poplar Bluff R-I School District

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