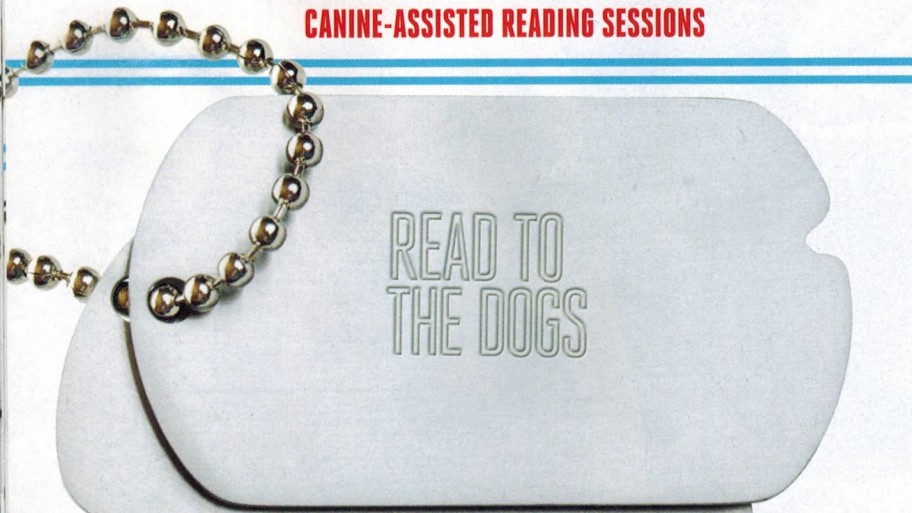




PAGE-TURNING POOCHES:

CANINE-ASSISTED READING SESSIONS



Imagining an audience in their underwear is one way to get over stage fright, but what if the audience starts panting and licking themselves as well?

That's the premise behind the Tales of Joy R.E.A.D (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) Program within the Rio Rancho Public School system, where certified therapy dogs help kindergarten through fifth-grade students improve their reading skills by being the children's audience.

The bone-chewing, squirrel-chasing, toilet-water-drinking, hole-digging, homework-eating audience. The program employs 27 of these unique and patient pooches and their volunteer owners, which are sent out to local schools to meet and listen to stories from schoolchildren on a weekly basis.

Dogs and their owners are sent into each school and find a quiet corner of the library where children can regale Rover with a book. Children not only gain reading aptitude from the program, but their improved abilities help bolster their confidence and social skills, Tales of Joy R.E.A.D. Program Coordinator Theresa McKinney says.

"Not only do reading levels improve, but so does the whole child," McKinney says. "Especially if there's a kiddo who's a little shy and doesn't like to speak out loud to the class and their social skills are lacking a little bit."

So what's the x-factor behind the success of the program? According to McKinney, it's simple; dogs don't judge.

"They don't judge, they don't laugh, and they don't make fun. They listen intently, they love unconditionally, and that's why any therapy program with dogs works, whether it's for a hospital, nursing home, or students," McKinney says. "The presence of a dog is just calming."

The program is gaining steam—this year, at least 50 to 70 students are expected

to participate, and good ideas rarely stay in one place.

Since the program was introduced in 2006 with the help of Rio Rancho Associate Superintendent Dr. V. Sue Cleveland, it has spawned "sister" programs in other communities throughout New Mexico, including Bernalillo, Cuba, Gallup, and Pojoaque, McKinney says.

She, too, is a program volunteer, and takes her two dogs (Jesse James, a Yellow Labrador Retriever and Doc Holliday, a Golden Retriever) to listen to Rio Rancho's children on a regular basis.

"This is one of those 'outside the box' programs that gets results," McKinney says. "Every child doesn't fit into a certain criteria of learning—sometimes you need to think outside of that box."

Volunteer Pam Smith agrees. She joined up with the program four years ago after running into McKinney in an obedience class for her dog, Lacey—a miniature poodle rescue dog with a penchant for people pleasing. The instructor told Smith that Lacey would make a good therapy dog, and Smith inquired about the Tales of Joy R.E.A.D. Program.

"I told the instructor I was particularly interested in that program, and

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she said, 'Well, you're in luck because the coordinator of that program is in this class, sitting next to you,'" Smith says.

Smith was attracted to the program because it had a well-established track record and a well-defined mission—helping children get over reading anxiety.

If children know they aren't very good readers and they are asked to read to the class, their anxiety levels skyrocket, Smith says.

"They know probably that they are not the best readers; when we go to the school and sit down with children one-on-one, they really relax," Smith says. "We're in a no-judgement zone for 30 minutes. They're stroking the dog and reading a good book."

In fact, it's a pretty cushy job if you're the human, Smith says.

"All I do is help the children sound out words or make sense of phrases they don't understand," she says. "Lacey does the rest."

For more info on the program, visit talesofjoyread.com.

Doc Holiday and Jesse look ready for storytime.



Pam Smith and her white poodle, Lacy, enjoy reading to children.

