

More Than Man's Best Friend

By Ashley Finke

A local organization aims to build a love of literature with the friendliest of help

On a weekday evening inside a Baraboo library, a little bit of magic is happening. Seated on a snuggly fleece blanket between a fortress of books, a child is learning to read—by reading aloud to a dog.

It's a unique program brought to the area by Laura Kuchta, a mother of four who runs a licensed daycare in Baraboo while also serving as president of Dogs on Call. A group well-versed in using canine volunteers to help humans in a host of ways, Dogs on Call members and volunteers make appearances in typical and not-so-typical settings, from schools and college dorms to nursing homes, hospice centers and hospitals, including Madison's Meriter Hospital. But there's nothing like seeing a dog seated next to a child in a library, both attentively watching the pages of a book turn.

"In my job working with kids, I know how important literacy is—so any tool you can use to get a child to want to read is fantastic," Kuchta says.

It's with that wisdom in mind that Kuchta decided to affiliate her group with the unique literacy program Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.). Based on a therapy program established by Intermountain Therapy Animals, a national nonprofit, the unique method's success shows that dogs can act as a stepping stone for children—particularly those in kindergarten through third grade—learning to read.

"I don't know of another volunteer organization out there that works with animals to improve literacy," Kuchta says.



The premise is fairly straightforward: Learning to read is often less about intellectual limitation and more about overcoming fears, Kuchta explains. Holding sessions in local libraries, the program aims to improve children's reading and communication skills by having them read to a volunteer pup certified with its owner as a therapy team. Reading to a friendly dog, who is trained in directed attention to focus on what their owner is doing (including flipping through pages in a book), has been shown to relax and motivate children. It is with their canine companions by their side that for many children, the words just start to flow.

Kuchta vividly remembers one of her first success stories. An elementary-aged child came into a R.E.A.D. session with a baby book, making no eye contact and stumbling over every other word. After several months of sessions with R.E.A.D., Kuch-

ta witnessed how the child's confidence skyrocketed and reading level improved. These days, the child comes in regularly with a chapter book under one arm, excited to read to a furry friend.

Now with regular sessions for school-aged children in libraries across Dane County, including Madison and Middleton, Kuchta hopes to one day see the R.E.A.D. program expand into local schools.

Though not a substitute for what a child can learn from a teacher or parent, Kuchta says the program is a valuable supplement, especially for kids who need a little confidence boost. The effort, she hopes, will be felt for years to come.

"Literacy gets you so far in life," she says. "[This is] all about helping the kids in the long run."

Want to see the R.E.A.D. program in action? Visit Barnes and Noble at East Towne Mall on Sept. 17 at 2 p.m. for a Dogs on Call presentation, featuring a dog bite prevention workshop and a R.E.A.D. demonstration.

Canines in the Community

A host of local organizations show the difference dogs can make

Dogs on Call

Receive training with your even-tempered dog to become a volunteer therapy team making a difference in locations from hospitals to schools and everywhere in between. dogsoncall.org.

Pet Pals

Developed by the UW School of Veterinary Medicine, this program trains pets and owners to visit patients at the American Family Children's Hospital. vetmed.wisc.edu/petpals.

Badger Kennel Club

Prep your pup to become a registered therapy dog, which makes them eligible to volunteer at hospitals, hospice centers, nursing homes and more. badgerkennelclub.com