



Albuquerque Youngsters Brush up on Their Skills by Reading to Dogs

Julie Medina/Special to The Tribune
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At least one child at the Main Library in Downtown Albuquerque experienced a moment of epiphany on Saturday. Alizarin Beard, 10, said she learned that even though reading is difficult for her, she can read out loud and nobody will laugh — especially the dogs.

Alizarin, or Ali, and her mother often visit the Downtown library on the second Saturday of the month for the branch's book sale. They said they have seen the Read to the Dogs program, but Ali has never "had the guts" to participate before.

Members of the Southwest Canine Corps of Volunteers bring trained therapy dogs to the Main Library on the second Saturday of the month so children can practice reading out loud to a non-threatening animal.

The program, which sees up to 20 kids in one afternoon, began in 2002 when Cheryl Mugleston, the youth librarian at the Main Library, began looking into similar programs in other states. As she was doing her research, she was contacted by the Southwest Canine Corps of Volunteers who were also interested in starting a local Read to the Dogs program. The program has since expanded to include six library locations around Albuquerque.

On this Saturday, Ali said she looked into the room and saw all the kids reading to the dogs, and she realized she wanted to read to them, too.

"I was thinking, 'What if I make a fool out of myself?'" Ali said. "There's all sorts of people crowded around me."

But, Ali said, it made her feel better that among all the younger children crowded around listening was Rufus, a 5-year-old German spitz.

"Rufus was lying down," she said. "He would put his head up and look around. I got to feed him after I was finished."

Ali said she did make mistakes while she was reading, but she just sounded out the words and kept on going.

"There is never any pressure to be perfect," said Cindy Wacek, owner of Bogie, a Chihuahua who participates every month.

Wacek, who spends her days as a special education teacher, said the volunteers never correct the children's reading.

"At first, sometimes the children will tell about pictures," she said. "They seem to enjoy being around the dogs, and it encourages a love of reading."

Over time, the children progress from making up stories to reading stories.

“We try to come every time,” Wacek said. “It’s awesome to see kids who want to learn. Dogs can do some awesome things with kids that I can’t do. They can pull kids in when you can’t. They probably do more good in that one day than I do all week.”

Meredith Brown, Rufus’ owner, said she enjoys watching the kids who repeatedly come to the program who are struggling with reading.

“They keep practicing,” she said, “and over time we see improvement.”

Wacek said the kids really enjoy getting Bogie to do tricks after they finish reading. And Bogie has a whole assortment of tricks to share. He can sneeze on command and blow his nose in a Kleenex. He dances. And he prays. Once in a great while, when he is in a rare mood, he will “talk.”

“He loves the kids,” Wacek said. “They are not quick enough to get the treats away. It gives the kids a feeling of success if they can get him to do something.”

It is not easy for dogs to become therapy dogs, Wacek said. They have to complete a series of tests to demonstrate how well the owner and the dog behave. Then, they have to be observed in a clinical setting and complete five training visits with a trainer supervising.

Bogie is very smart naturally, Wacek said, but they still continue to take classes for more training. Bogie has completed basic obedience, dog agility and trick classes.

Veronica Neuman, 13, and her sister, Rebecca, 10, have been coming to the Read to the Dogs program since it began. And Veronica said it has made a difference in her reading.

“I didn’t like reading in front of people,” she said. “But now when I sit down to read, a lot of toddlers come listen to me.”

In fact, Veronica has become so comfortable reading in front of kids that she started volunteering at the library during the summer.

“It’s like the dogs are really listening to you,” she said. “I think they like books about dogs best. When you are reading about other animals, they lie down and don’t look at you. But when you are reading about dogs, they look at the pictures and the book, and they listen.”

Veronica said that even though they have a dog at home, this is better.

“Our dog isn’t trained,” she said. “Sometimes he’ll stay, and sometimes he’ll get up and go. These dogs behave.”

Veronica said she has watched a lot of kids who are scared of dogs. Some even start to cry. But when they sit down and start reading to the dogs, they want to read more, and they are happy.

Wendy Creel, Ali’s mother, said it has been really hard to watch her daughter struggle with reading, because Creel has always had her own nose in a book and loves to read.

“I’ve tried everything to get her to read,” she said. “If she shows the slightest interest, I will buy anything. I was excited that she was reading to the dogs.”