



MINNETONKA POOCH HELPS LOCAL KIDS READ

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Long-time Minnetonka resident Jon Richie knew Hugo, his 4-year-old Golden Retriever, was special. But it wasn't until Hugo's vet suggested that Hugo train as a therapy dog, that Richie knew just how special.

"The veterinarian mentioned it—a couple of times actually," Richie remembers. Following doctor's orders, Hugo took—and passed—the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen Test and Temperament Evaluation. He and Richie are now certified with Therapy Dogs International—a non-profit organization that regulates and tests therapy dogs and their volunteer handlers across the county. They visit nursing homes, hospitals, and schools as a registered therapy dog team.

"It's just a nice thing to do. Hugo loves the attention. And it breaks down barriers too," Richie says.

Richie and Hugo spend Monday mornings with second-graders at Cedar Ridge Elementary School. It's part of a school program, "Paws Loves Books," which second-grade teacher Katie Tompkins started at four years ago, after she and her 6-year-old Daschund, Oliver, became therapy dog-certified.



"I started after school hours. But 23 of the 25 kids in my class signed up the first year," Tompkins explains. "There was so much interest."

So much interest that the program is now incorporated into Cedar Ridge's standard second grade curriculum. Every other week, every second-grader has a chance to spend 15 minutes reading to one of the six therapy dog teams who participate in the program, including Richie and Hugo.



"I like that they listen to me and spending time with them," 8-year-old Aanvi says. "When I pet them and get to read to them, it's my favorite."

Classmate Prabhav, 7, agrees: "I like petting them and reading to them. It makes reading more fun because they are really soft."

According to Tompkins, that's exactly what the program is about.

"It definitely raises their motivation level to read. It's a much more calming way to practice oral reading. It's nonjudgmental, the dog's not going to point out your mistakes," Tompkins says. "It's very calming."

Bettina VerHalen and her 3-year-old Standard Poodle, Faith, have been reading with kids here since the start of the school year. And according to VerHalen, the experience is just as beneficial for Faith, who was rescued from an abusive home, as it is for the children who read to her.

"This was a perfect job for her. The kids love her and she loves to do it," VerHalen points out.

Hugo, who loves to eat ham and run loose at Minnetonka's Jidana Preserve, really enjoys the Monday morning reading sessions.

"He gets a positive vibe from it. He loves people, he loves attention. He seems to know they are good little people," Richie says. "I hope the kids appreciate the fact that there are a lot of nice dogs out there—that there is nothing really to be afraid of."

According to Tompkins, dog-fever is quickly spreading among the students.

"The kids love any book with animals. They love learning about animals right now," she says.

"I want one but my mom said they are too hard to take care of," Monique, 8, adds—feverishly.