

Therapy dogs come to aid of young readers

By Wendy Killeen
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HAVERHILL — Jerome Senior, 9, may have found the perfect audience.

Sitting in a low, comfortable chair, the fourth-grader read aloud from the chapter book "Undercover Tailback" as Star, a 9-year-old, yellow greyhound, lay nearby on a fleece dog bed.

"I liked how the dog really listened to me," Jerome said afterward. "I didn't feel as much pressure."

Across the room at the Haverhill Public Library his older sister, Hannah Senior, 12, read "Small Dogs" to a lanky 7-year-old, black greyhound, Copic.

"We signed up five days ago and each day we counted down how many days until they read to the dogs," said their mother, Mary Senior of Haverhill.

It seemed worth the wait.

"It was really fun," said Hannah, whose mother described her as "obsessed with dogs."

"I'd do it again," added Jerome, who had just moved closer to finishing his book for a school report.

"Dog Day Afternoons," an opportunity for kids to read to certified therapy dogs, kicked off at the library last week and runs Saturdays through the end of March.

"It's something that will build over time," said Leslie Todd, head of youth services at the Haverhill Public Library.

The program is modeled on Reading Education Assistance Dogs, started in 1999 by Intermountain Therapy Animals in Salt Lake City.

Todd discovered the program on the Internet and thought it would be a good addition to the library's services. "It encourages kids to read," she said. "Dogs are nonjudgmental. If you mispronounce a word, they won't correct you. It helps build confidence."

And she said, "For kids who don't have pets, but who like animals, it's a fun thing."

The Haverhill program, believed to be the first in the area, is geared for kids grades 1 through 5. It's free and runs from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Readers, who can bring their own books or choose from the library's selection, register for 20-minute slots. Two dogs, accompa-



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Jerome Senior reads to Star, owned by Carolyn Zuena of Burlington.

nied by their handlers, are available at a time. A new set of dogs is brought in each hour. And, they will include a variety of breeds.

Todd found the dogs through Dog B.O.N.E.S., Therapy Dogs of Massachusetts, based in Medford. The name stands for Dogs Building Opportunities for Nurturing and Emotional Support. Accompanied by their handlers, the dogs visit nursing homes, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, schools, and preschools.

Copic, owned by Shannon Quaglia, and Star, owned by Carolyn Zuena, are both retired racing dogs who were recently trained as therapy dogs. "We decided it would be fun to share them with people," Zuena said.

As the children entered the reading room, off the main children's room, the dogs calmly greeted them, then stood, sat or laid down beside them. Parents and other children weren't allowed in the room, but watched through a large window.

"I think it's so cool," said observer Celia Cole, 9, of Haverhill.

It also has serious educational

benefits, according to Kathy Klotz, executive director of Intermountain Therapy Animals, which offers assisted animal-therapy-reading programs in the schools and animal-assisted activities in libraries.

In the schools, teachers select students — who may have reading or social difficulties, such as shyness — to work with a therapy dog once a week.

Results have shown "everyone made improvement of some kind."

Some kids improved two grade levels in one school year, and some four grade levels, Klotz said. And, she said, "Other things happened. They developed more self-confidence. Absenteeism went down. They began finishing their homework in other classes. It spilled over into other areas."

The premise, Klotz explained, is that "with animals in therapy settings, people stop focusing inward, they turn outward. When a child is getting stitches or an injection and is playing with a dog, he or she doesn't notice the pain."

She said the same is true with

limitations. "When you're in school and get called on and put on the spot, lots of times you can't remember what you do know. Kids struggle with that and peer pressure and making mistakes," she said. "With the animals, that goes away. Kids stop thinking about what they can't do and it makes their abilities flow better."

The students also can "be engaged to help the dog understand," Klotz said. "If a child is struggling with a word you can say 'Rover never heard that before, can you tell him what it means?'" And that can be a starting point for discussing the word or looking it up in the dictionary, she added.

"When they think they are helping the dog, rather than putting them on the spot, it helps them do it all more naturally," Klotz said.

The READ program has been used with youngsters who have not yet begun to read but who can share a picture book or alphabet book, with students for whom English is a second language, and for those with mild learning disabilities.

Klotz said it's also great for the average kid. "The very act of reading and doing it repeatedly in an atmosphere that is warm and loving helps develop a love of reading you can build on your whole life."

And, it's not just about dogs, although they're preferred because they like to interact. There are also therapy cats, even bunnies.

Klotz said her organization has gotten inquiries about READ from 40 states and is developing a training package. Meanwhile, programs are being launched using its guidelines and independently around the country.

"It's an idea whose time has come," she said.

And it seemed to be working in Haverhill last Saturday. "It just clicked," said Mary Senior of her son's and daughter's participation. "For them, this is perfect."

For more information, call the Haverhill Public Library at 978-373-1588, ext. 630, or visit www.therapyanimals.org, or www.therapydog.info.