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## New reading pawtners: Animals, children connect over love of reading

By Catherine Wilson | The Herald-Zeitung  
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Elle Gossen reads to Zane Grey, a Maine Coon mix therapy cat at Paws to Read Friday, April 8, 2022 at the New Braunfels Public Library.

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John Tucker, 7, sits with his legs crossed upon a beanbag chair, a book firmly clutched in his hands as he enthusiastically reads about the love between a mother cow and her child.

Amidst the distinct sound of the turning pages he stumbles upon the more advanced words, but with Yogini as his primary audience all the fears of messing up seem to melt away.

Yogini is a Portuguese water dog and one of three registered therapy animals that volunteered their time to participate in a New Braunfels Public Library program where kids read to animals last Friday.

The program is called Paws to Read, which uses therapy animals that serve as non-judgmental listeners, as an incentive to get kids to read.

"It's so hard for children (to read aloud) because they have to practice at it and it's not natural yet so that can be tough," Whitney Hasler, the youth services librarian at New Braunfels Public Library said. "This way you've taking something that's more difficult but combining it with a warm fuzzy puppy. You can't go wrong."

While similar programs exist across the country, Paws to Read was introduced at the New Braunfels Public Library in the early 2010s. The library began working with therapy animal organizations and soon the program was launched.

Every few weeks, program organizers select several books from the library's shelves and place them on tables ready for readers to step up and select a book to read to a therapy animal.



Harrison Perkins reads to Tamara Yakes and her therapy dog a Portuguese Water Dog named Yogini, at Paws to Read Friday, April 8, 2022 at the New Braunfels Public Library.

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Over the span of the Paws to Read hour kids shuffle from animal to animal with a new book in hand gathering trading cards and forming bonds with the animals and their handlers along the way.



Carter Perkins receives a high five from therapy dog Bentley at Paws to Read as Michelle Dunn watches Friday, April 8, 2022 at the New Braunfels Public Library.

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Animals, especially trained therapy animals, have an ornate ability to connect with people and see and feel things that are beyond human understanding, according to Beverly Oakes, who works with Therapy Animals of San Antonio.

Oakes, who has been volunteering at Paws to Read for the last several years, brought in her 5-year-old therapy cat Zane to be read to. Throughout the duration of the session Zane listened tentatively to stories he was read while being pet and loved on by all in

attendance.

“In a program like this you’ve got an animal that’s non-judgmental,” Oakes said. “They’re not worried about how the kid pronounces anything and they’re not going to criticize them. A lot of times they’re just breaking the ice and making the kid feel more comfortable.”

Since the program began, the library’s staff has witnessed several children and their parents make return appearances. But new kids show up and those who run the program get to see

first hand the impact reading to an animal has on the child's confidence.

"Sometimes you'll get a child — who when they come in — you can see that hesitation and that reluctance," Jenny Rodriguez, the youth services manager at the library said. "Then over the course of coming in and reading to these animals you see them come out of their shell and you see them loosen up and their reading improves."

In recent months Paws to Read has been struggling with holding the program at its designated schedule due to a lack of therapy animal volunteers. Like most public programs, Paws to Read came to halt during COVID-19 and many of its established volunteers couldn't return. Without animals to read to, the library has been forced to limit the amount of readers or cancel Paws to Read events altogether.

"I think if we had more therapy dogs available we could bring in more people to read. We are constrained by the number of animals that are available," said Hasler, who also coordinates the volunteers for the program. "They have to be registered therapy animals and their handlers have to have time, and a lot of things have to come together to make it work."

Those who are part of therapy animal organizations looking to volunteer their time and their registered therapy animals to the Paws to Read program can contact Hasler at the New Braunfels Public Library.

Paws to Read is held at the New Braunfels Public Library from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. every other week or so on Fridays. However, scheduling may change due to therapy animal availability so check with the library before stopping by.

The next Paws to Read is scheduled for Friday, April 29.