

Stone Creek Elementary to get Walker's third facility dog

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By:

[Ben Benton \(Contact\)](#)

Another Walker County school has gone to the dogs, or rather, another dog is coming to a Walker school.

Kay Gaither, the community-based education teacher at Stone Creek Elementary School, hopes to leave for training in Florida in May, where she'll be matched with Walker County's third "facility dog."

"It's human training; it's not dog training," Mrs. Gaither said.

She follows in the footsteps of two other Walker County teachers who were trained at Canine Companions for Independence facilities in Orlando, Fla.

A facilities dog is trained in skills similar to a traditional service or assistance dog, except the animal and handler focus more on working in a public setting, said Martha Johnson, spokeswoman for Canine Companions for Independence.

Mrs. Gaither, whose students have special needs, thinks her new partner "will help with the social image of my students," she said.

"Instead of my class being the class of students with handicaps, my class will become the class with the cool dog," she said, and that will help her students interact better with students throughout the school.

Ms. Johnson said her organization has about 250 dogs, which are free to approved applicants working in the Southeast. Canine Companions uses Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers and crosses of the two to become assistance dogs, she said.

Chattanooga Valley Elementary School counselor Jose Jimenez and Rossville Middle School graduation coach Patti Francis have facility dogs at their schools.

Mr. Jimenez said his dog, Zorro, like the other facility dogs, can help students who come for counseling when they're upset or agitated. A few minutes of Zorro therapy "allows me to build a really quick rapport," he said. Dogs trained at Canine Companions are selected for their temperament, and

Zorro's demeanor has a calming effect, he said.

Zorro also serves as a listener for reading programs and even helps with conflict resolution between students, he said.

"I'll have them go outside and toss a ball together with the dog or take a walk with the dog or groom the dog together," he said. "Most the time, by the time we're done, the little problem they had is gone."

At Rossville Middle, Reebee was matched to Ms. Francis in 2005, and he now serves as a companion animal for the school's students and as a listener when they practice reading, she said.

"He's very charming, and they're delighted to be with a dog in school," she said. "It really does facilitate engaging them in the whole process of being here at school. They've always got Reebee to count on."



Staff Photo by Angela Lewis/Chattanooga Times Free Press
Samuel West pets Zorro in Jose Jimenez' office at Chattanooga Valley Elementary School. Stone Creek Elementary will soon be getting a facilities dog also.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about service and facility dogs trained through Canine Companions for Independence, go to www.caninecompanions.org.

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