

School's new canine helps link disabled children to world

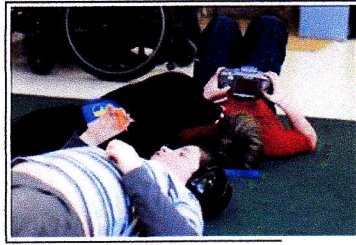
By Adam Crisp
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ROSSVILLE — Meet Rene. She's the only employee at Stone Creek Elementary School allowed to take naps on the job.

She even recruits students to join her on the floor to catch a few winks between assignments.

But don't start calling the school board with complaints. Teachers and administrators say taking it easy is a big part of Rene's job.

A specially trained facility dog, Rene is at Stone Creek simply to provide comfort to children who don't always form the best relationships with adults.



"She lets kids love her," said Kay Gaither, Rene's handler. "Mostly, she's here just for enjoyment."

And for some of Gaither's students, who have a range of disabilities including autism, dogs have been shown to provide a calming effect and to help them form attachments with other students and adults.

The dog acts as a sort of bridge, said Gaither, who has taught special education for 13 years and joined the Stone Creek staff two years ago.

"It helps bring the kids out of their shells," she said, pointing at students who aren't usually comfortable talking to adults, but were at ease petting Rene's shiny black coat with teachers and even strangers.

Gaither brought the dog to class six weeks ago, and already she has seen a change in her students. The black Labrador retriever lives with Gaither and her husband and their other black Lab, 5-year-old Lucy.

HOW TO HELP

Canine Companions for Independence is a California-based nonprofit that links assistance dogs with people who need them. With training centers in Colorado, Ohio, New York and Florida, CCI linked 232 dogs with people in 2010 at no charge to the recipients. The group survives on a network of volunteers who raise dogs to 8 weeks old and on donations from individuals and businesses. For more information, visit www.cci.org or call 1-800-572-BARK.

Experts agree that dogs can help children with developmental delays, but Rene won't just hang out with Gaither's community-based education class.

"Rene is a wonderful motivation for students in a classroom where motivation is key to success," Principal Brandon Mosgrove said. "Her primary role will be in that classroom, but other students see the dog and are excited about it, too."

Already Mosgrove has used Rene's calming effect as a way to help students communicate better.

"If a student comes in with problems at home or some other troubles, we can bring over Rene, and she acts as a way to calm the child so we can discuss what's wrong," Mosgrove said. "She has a disarming effect in that way."

Walker County's three in-school dogs all have come through the nonprofit Canine Companions for Independence, a California-based group that linked the teachers with the animals and provided two weeks of training.

The whole adoption and training process took two years for Gaither. She spent two weeks away from class in November to be trained and paired with Rene.

Canine Companions also provides animals that guide the blind and assist the disabled.

"It takes a tremendous amount of dedication from a teacher to go through our application process — two long weeks of class to learn how to care for and use the dog, and then slowly integrating the dog into that new setting," said Lori Lindsay, Southeast region program manager for Canine Companions. "It is truly a labor of love."

Though it's mostly free to participants — Gaither only had to pay her travel to Canine Companions' Orlando, Fla., facility — the organization survives by using volunteers to raise the dogs to 8 weeks old. It is funded through donations.

"All of our dogs are provided free of charge, and corporate and private donations play a crucial role in sustaining the extensive service CCI offers to the public in need of such companionship," said Martha Johnson, regional spokeswoman for Canine Companions.