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MONTICELLO — As a reading specialist in an elementary school, it's Missy Fee's job to help students improve their literacy skills. And now, she has a special sidekick to help her accomplish that, in the form of a petite and portable poodle.

Last year, the longtime Monticello resident had her canine companion certified as a specially trained therapy dog, enlisting 8-year-old Desi to help children read, among other tasks.

"I love reading with kids, so to bring Desi in makes the experience even better," Fee said. "Dogs, to me, are therapeutic. There's something calming about them. And it's really rewarding to share that with people."

Since September, Fee has been toting her loyal pooch to the Monticello Public Library each month for one-on-one reading sessions with local youth.

"It's fun to have an activity like this," Fee said. "It combines the therapy thing with spending time and reading with people."

During their fourth and most recent library session, on Dec. 20, Fee settled Desi on a bench, placing the hypoallergenic miniature poodle on his own small blanket before encouraging her first reader of the night to squeeze in beside him.

With little Desi in the middle of Fee and 2-year-old Lola Waataja, the trio got to work, sorting through a pile of colorful picture books.

The tutu-clad toddler and the small tan dog both listened intently as Fee narrated the words of Eric Carle's "Dream Snow," pausing for a moment to snuggle Desi before moving on to the Grinch and other books in the stack.

"This is her first time, and she was super excited," said Lola's mom, Mackenzie Waataja, who sat nearby, watching the trio engage.



Throughout the session, as Lola squirmed and shifted, Desi stayed put, rarely leaving her side. After all, this is what he's been trained to do.

Desi earned his therapy dog certification from the Monticello Dog Academy in 2022, after first receiving his Canine Good Citizen certificate, a 10-skill training program that focuses on the basics of good manners and obedience.

The entire process took a few months altogether, with each class lasting eight weeks.

"He did really well," Fee said. "He learned a lot and so did I."

You see, it's not just the dog that receives training. Therapy certification through the Helping and Healing Paws program is a team effort, with both canine and owner learning the ropes together.



"We are a team," Fee said. "We were certified together."

Helping and Healing Paws is a Minnesota-based nonprofit that trains dogs for the specific tasks of therapy work, including visits to hospitals, schools, nursing homes and more.

"We had a lot of training around different experiences and obstacles, like wheelchairs, anything that gets dropped on the floor, like food," Fee said.

Desi, along with the other dogs in class, had to walk through a trail of treats and toys and get to the other side of the room without grabbing those things, she said.

Fee was encouraged to bring Desi into all sorts of places and different situations, to get him accustomed to different environments, experiences and people.

"We practiced in elevators, on stairs, walking by people."

So far, Desi — named after Desi Arnaz of "I Love Lucy" — has mainly used his new skills at the library and at Annandale Elementary School, where Fee has worked for the past 30 years.

"He loves to be at school and around the kids," she said.

Students there clamor to spend time with Desi, who has become something of a school celebrity, writing him letters that they then read to him.

The duo also volunteered this past summer at a local cancer center, where Desi also quickly found fame.

"The nurses and doctors loved him as much as the patients," Fee said.

Desi's owners believe he has just the right sort of personality and disposition for the job.

“He’s very gifted. His temperament is just right for this,” said Ron Fee, Missy’s husband and Desi’s dad. “He has a knack for knowing when he’s needed for a calming experience.”

Missy agreed, describing Desi as “really laid back,” quiet and loving, but not overly affectionate.

“I think kids and people feel comfortable, because he’s not jumping all over them and he’s not real loud or in their face,” she said.

“He’s not afraid to sit on a person’s lap and cuddle,” Ron said.

The Fees believe Desi shines most in his work with children.

“Kids love dogs, and he’s a nice size for most little ones too,” Ron said.



Monticello mom Angela Dingmann brought her 9-year-old son, Sawyer, to the library last week for a reading session with Desi.

“He has selective mutism,” she said of the Little Mountain Elementary third-grader. “We’re working on encouraging him and working on his brave voice.”

Missy Fee was ecstatic to have an older child there to do the reading himself, as many of the kids she works with are younger, and are there to be read to.

The shy, soft-spoken boy picked out the humorous graphic novel “Donut Feed the Squirrels,” by Mika Song, to read to Desi, mostly whispering to the little dog, who sat patiently.

“You kept me entertained with that book, Desi too,” Missy told the first-timer, “I hope you’ll come back and read to us, Desi would love it, too.”

Desi and Missy will be back at the Monticello Public Library to do more reading on Wednesday, Jan. 17. Children can sign up for a time slot between 5:30 and 7 p.m. Register in person or online at <https://events.griver.org/event/11775280>.

https://www.hometownsource.com/monticello_times/therapy-dog-helps-children-read/article_c4a43f5e-a432-11ee-af9a-db5d17bca863.html