

Furry friends encourage reading in Carroll County

WESTMINSTER – St. John School and Parish kicked off Catholic Schools Week with the help of some furry friends.

Students of Carroll County's only Catholic school, along with young parishioners studying in the religious education classes at St. John Parish, read to therapy dogs during an animal-themed Scholastic Book Fair Jan. 28.

When Tracie Amey, a pre-K teacher at the school, noticed that the posters advertising the book fair were filled with drawings of dogs, she knew she had the perfect way to bring the event to life – give the students the opportunity to read their new books to real dogs.

Amey works with her husband, Mike, as a team of handlers for their Golden Retriever, Macy Mae. Macy is trained through Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services (KPETS) as a therapy dog.

The dogs in the program, which can be of any breed and background, work in many different environments – from hospitals to nursing homes. Many dogs are stationed at local libraries where young children love to read them books.

Reading to an animal can lessen stress and improve their skills, according to Amey.

"It makes it more enjoyable for (the children)," Amey said.

"If there are a lot of stresses going on, it can be very soothing," said Desiree Fleagle, a volunteer who brought her Jack Russell terrier, Annie, to the event.

Georgeanne Trummert brought her Lhasa Apso-Dachshund mix, Dempsey – a veteran listener.

Trummert said that at other events, children read to Dempsey and he often puts his head into the book. Children often comment that Dempsey is reading with them.

“They pet him while they’re reading and they’re very relaxed,” Trummert said. “There’s no judgment.”

On Tuesday, as part of Catholic Schools Week, the students of St. John will focus on service. The pre-K, second- and sixth-grade classes are collaborating on a drive for the Carroll County Humane Society.

During the day, they will create a poster for the shelter, and will sort and organize the items collected. F Amey will then present on the differences between service and therapy dogs, and will show the students how they can contribute and serve through organizations such as KPETS.

Also part of Catholic Schools Week, the “Paws for Books” book fair will stay in the school’s library. The week also includes a day with parents on Monday, a visit from Archbishop William E. Lori on Wednesday, and Grandparents’ Day on Friday.

The book fair is hosted by the Business of Books club for fifth- through eighth-graders, which was started a few years ago. Mary Ann Saccone, a substitute teacher, library volunteer and mother of St. John seventh-graders Matthew and Sophia, leads the club.

Beginning in the fall, the 16 students in the club learn about marketing, sales and merchandising.

Saccone stressed the desire the school has to get kids excited about reading, and having the dogs around helps that cause.

“Once they read, it opens up a whole world to them,” Saccone said. “They need to be able to read no matter what field they go into.”

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