

A little puppy love goes a long way

On the campus of St. Francis Xavier School in the St. Joseph Catholic Academy, one might happen to notice a different presence in the hall....a canine.

Kathy Roberts is the elementary and middle school counselor for St. Francis and with her, is her therapy dog, Bella. We caught up with her and asked her about the importance of this four-legged ministry she brings to the children of SFX.

Q: How did you get into therapy dog work?

A: I had been interested in therapy dog work for many years, but the behaviors of my previous dogs did not allow that dream to come true! Although Bella's parents, aunts, and uncles were livestock guardians, we adopted Bella to be a house pet. She consistently displayed an "old soul", and her ever-present calm temperament made her an ideal candidate for therapy work!

Q: What's one of the biggest rewards/benefits of having a therapy dog in an elementary school setting?

A: Bella brings great joy to SFX students and staff, and the feeling is reciprocated! She will definitely pout when she can't see her "fans". Bella is a calming presence that loves all students, young and old. It is always amazing that the smallest students are never apprehensive of Bella's size, and openly heap love on her! I think Bella is an excellent conduit for communication, helping students relax to tell their story. I also use her to teach safety practices for dog interaction, i.e asking the dog owner/walker for permission to pet their dog.

Q: Can you think of a success story between Bella and a student (anonymous of course)?

A: Most recently, a student who experienced health issues was having a difficult day. As the student came down the hall, they were greeted by Bella. The student just melted into Bella! I heard the teacher ask if Bella was making them feel better, and the student nodded emphatically!

Q: What was your takeaway from the experience?

A: This experience confirmed for me that Bella is empathic, and is able to absorb the feelings (both good and bad) from her students and staff. It also confirmed for me that student's need interactions that are nonjudgmental!

Q: What qualifies a dog to be a therapy dog?

A: Dogs who become certified Therapy Dogs must complete extensive obedience training conducted by a certified group or individual. In February of 2018, after many weeks of hard work on her part, Bella graduated from obedience training, passed her temperament evaluation,

and earned the AKC CGC (Canine Good Citizen) certificate. In April, she earned her Therapy Dog certificate from Pony Express Therapy Dog group and University of Missouri Extension in Buchanan County. Bella and I then enjoyed visiting with residents of the local assisted-living facilities, Heartland Hospital, East Hills Library, and several educational venues.

Q: If someone wanted to learn more about therapy dog training, where could they go?

A: I would encourage those interested in Therapy Dogs to contact Pony Express Therapy Dogs.