

Reading goes to the dogs

Therapy pets make perfect listeners as homeless children share books

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PERCHED ON a desk at the Prospect Family Inn, a homeless shelter in the Bronx, 7-year-old Chaitonee reads from her favorite book, "Dog Breath." Her audience, a big black mutt named Missy, who was celebrating her eighth birthday, stretches her paw across Chaitonee's lap, looks into her eyes and listens.

When they are done, Chaitonee reaches over and gives Missy a hug. She says she likes reading to Missy because "she loves me. When I'm finished reading, she always licks me and gives me a kiss."

Chaitonee is one of four homeless children between the ages of 6 and 9 who participate in an after-school Reading for Dogs program, a new partnership between Bideawee, the animal welfare organization, and Homes for the Homeless. That nonprofit group has residential, education and employment training centers that service over 600 homeless families and 1,000 homeless children at five sites around New York City.

Animal-assisted therapy, in which specially trained animals visit facilities ranging from hospitals to homeless shelters to assist in physical or psychological rehabilitation, isn't new. But the idea of using therapy animals in reading programs is a concept that has just recently caught on.

The innovative pet therapy program allows the children to have one-on-one sessions with a Bideawee therapy dog, reading aloud their favorite books. Once a week, the four students who participate in the Bronx shelter are driven from to the Manhattan Bideawee, where they each

spend 30 minutes reading books such as "Curious George" or "The Stray Cat," and playing with Missy.

Missy's owner serves as a listener, coaching the children when appropriate, as well as encouraging the dog to focus on the child and the book.

It's not surprising Chaitonee and her friends bond with Missy; before becoming a therapy dog, the Lab-mix had also been homeless, but was fortunate to have found a new family through Bideawee.

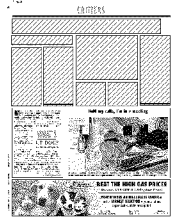
Robert Mascali, director of operations for Homes for the Homeless says the Reading to Dogs program has done much more than get the kids jazzed up about reading.

"They're going through a difficult time in their life. It's unconditional love, and we all need that," he said. "They're caressing the dogs. They're hugging them. It's 50% emotional and 50% about reading."

Lina Haimelin, Bideawee's director of education, says children who might be hesitant, embarrassed or shy about their reading abilities feel at ease around a dog who is there to listen and not judge or criticize the way the child reads. The hope is that with new-found self-esteem also comes better social skills and hopefully improvement in school attendance.

Missy and her owner are one of 17 pet partners in Bideawee's Reading for Dogs program. In addition to Homes for the Homeless, the teams work in classrooms, libraries, and schools throughout metro New York.

The reading therapy dogs are trained and certified at Bideawee through the Delta Society. The Good Dog Foundation — thegooddogfoundation.org — also certifies therapy dogs to help at-risk children learn to read.





Keyla Lara, 9, reads to Missy as Missy's owner, Reading for Dogs program volunteer Eric Dennis, looks on. Photo by James Keivom/Daily News