

# THE VERY BEST LISTENERS

Students' struggles fade when they snuggle up and read with their four-legged partner.



*by Bridget McGinn, for The  
Bulletin Special Projects  
Photos by Kevin Prieto*

Portraits of respected and beloved teachers line the wall in a hallway at Elk Meadow Elementary School in Bend. But these are not ordinary teachers — they have tails.

Over the past 12 years the registered therapy dog teams in the Dog Tales program at the school have helped hundreds of children develop their reading, writing and social skills. Together with their handlers, the dogs have undergone extensive training and testing and visit the school regularly, much to the delight of the children they are paired with for one-on-one support.

“When I first met Dwight the dog we got to feed him and lay on the blanket and just spend time with him,” said Liam Santos, a third grader who graduated from the program last year. “When he’s gone I write him letters.”

Jemma Santos, Liam’s mother, recalls picking up Liam after school on the first day of his participation in the program. He told her about reading with a dog and working on a poem together. At first Santos wasn’t sure about the program, but she could clearly see that Liam was enjoying the experience. And not only that, but as a shy child in a new school, he was coming out of his shell. Time

spent reading out loud to Dwight and practicing his reading and writing skills began to pay off, and Santos began to see the improvement in her son's fluency.

"Liam is a shy kid, and reading aloud in the classroom made him really nervous," said Santos. "Sitting next to Dwight and petting him while he read took his mind off the anxiety of reading and allowed him to break through."

Now, Santos said, Liam brings home beautiful poems that he has written and reads every night, often to his four-month-old little brother, Simon.

"His teacher told me that in the classroom he raises his hand to volunteer to read aloud," said Santos. "I'm so proud to hear that. He worked really hard on that."

*Dwight*  
*By Liam Santos*

*Reading with Dwight*  
*is fun*  
*like playing video games*

*He has a furry tail*  
*that wags fast when he sees*  
*me*

*He's a huge dog*  
*with a wet ice cube nose*

*Mrs. Lundgren is*  
*nice*

*I'm excited when I'm ready*  
*to go read*  
*My heart beats*  
*fast*

*It's like Christmas morning.*

The program has morphed over the years to meet the needs of the children, said Heather Korman, a second grade teacher at Elk Meadow who was one of the founders of the Dog Tales program. Often, the time a student spends with a dog and handler is not really about reading at all, she said. The program is designed to address a child's social and emotional areas in need of development, as well as reading and writing skills.

"If a child needs reading support, or if they could benefit from a special

friendship, the dogs can offer that," said Korman.

"When the kids are walking out of the classroom to meet up with their dog every other student in the classroom wants to be them," said Shirley Lundgren, a reading specialist at the school who has volunteered along with her dog Dwight with the program for nine years. "It is a feeling of being special that a lot of students have never had before."

The Dog Tales program began 12 years ago when Korman happened to see a flyer inviting children to come read with dogs at the library. While she was impressed with the library program, she knew that transportation and other issues would most likely be obstacles for the children in her school on Bend's south side.

"I started thinking, 'How do I get kids the help they need when they can't make it to the library?'" said Korman. "I figured I would go to Compassionate Canines of Central Oregon and basically beg them to help. I told them that these kids needed a reason to keep reading."

The first volunteers with the program were an older couple with two very small dogs.

"From there it took off," said Korman.

*Conguita*  
*By Lacie Weaver*

*Reminds me of my favorite*  
*lamb blanket*  
*with a wagging tail*

*She's like a teddy bear*  
*who gives me kisses and*  
*puts her head in my lap*

*She's as pretty as a*  
*blooming flower*  
*with bright blue eyes*

*Jennifer makes me feel special*  
*she is my favorite person*  
*next to my family*

*When I read with them*  
*I feel excited, happy, cool and*  
*proud*

Jennifer Horsman, Volunteer Coordinator for Compassionate Canines of Central Oregon and a member of the Alliance of Therapy Dogs, has been vol-



Conguita brings a book to a student for storytime (above). Liam Santos and Lydia Unruh spend time reading with Dwight (below).



## “I like reading to the dogs because they are always nice and listen to me.” — Cadon Robinson

unteering at Elk Meadow since 2001 and has had several therapy dogs in the program, including Patches, Reggie, Tucker, Hobie and Conguita.

She and Conguita, who was rescued off a beach in Mexico, visit the program weekly. Horsman has found that Conguita's background provides a connection with many of the children at the school. Often Horsman will bring a map of Mexico for a geography lesson with the children, sharing Conguita's journey to the United States.

“I have heard many stories about their parents' similar journeys and I would never have been able to make these connections with these very special kids, whose parents are not bi-lingual, if not for Conguita,” said Horsman. “It is not always about reading. I remain open to what the kids want to share.”

Horsman said that dogs like Conguita who are relaxed, quietly social and approachable do well in the program. They give off a safe aura that children find comforting.

“I like reading to the dogs because they are always nice and listen to me,” said third grader Cadon Robinson, a graduate of the Dog Tales program.

Reading with a dog has been proven to lower children's blood pressure, allowing them to relax and enjoy the experience. Research shows that positive interactions help children establish a foundation for learning that will last a lifetime.

“I didn't used to like reading much,” said Simone Peterson, a third grader who has participated in the program. “I thought it was boring. But now I don't. Some books can help you feel better when you are feeling sad sometimes.”

According to information shared by the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program — one of the first and largest programs in the country — much of the success of the model can be attributed to the process of letting the child focus their attention on the dog. It takes their mind off their own anxiety about their reading skills and children are empowered to help the dog understand the words and story. They become a teacher, instead of a student lacking skills, and are able to enjoy the process of reading to someone who listens closely without judging.

“Reading to a dog is easy and comfortable,” said Gwen Brock, one

of two R.E.A.D. instructors in Oregon. “And the child is not criticized by other children.”

Children love to have fun, and using techniques to make reading fun helps them to learn very quickly, said Brock.

“Reading is so important in everyone's life, but more so for children,” said Brock. “Learning to read from kindergarten through third grade is crucial so that they can read to learn from fourth grade and on, for the rest of their lives.”

### *Conguita* By Cadon Robinson

*Reading with her is fun  
like playing my favorite card  
game*

*She is pretty  
the color of a  
chocolate candy bar*

*Her hair is smooth  
like a soft blanket*

*Jennifer is fun  
she helps me with  
difficult words*

*I can tell her all  
my thoughts*

*I'm so happy to see them  
every week*

Third grader Lydia Unruh graduated from the program last year and has retained strong bonds with Dwight and the volunteers who participate in the program. Although Dwight is now retired, he still receives letters and stories from the children, to which he always responds.

“I like to write to Dwight and tell him about my holidays and what I'm doing outside of school,” said Lydia.

The relationships that develop between the dogs, students and handlers are based on understanding and support and continue even after the students have graduated from the program.

“Sometimes it is about having a good friend,” said Korman. “And that can be a reason to come to school.”

Korman and Lundgren recall a student who participated in the program that was very shy and unable to make eye contact at the beginning of the school year. Through participating in the Dog Tales program, he blossomed and became more sure of himself, even to the point of volunteering to write a paper on what the program had meant to him.

“He wrote his paper and we worked for a month reading it out loud to Dwight,” said Lundgren. “We practiced a lot and he was able to stand up and read his paper out loud in front of a large group of people.”

That kind of transformation is commonplace for the students who participate in the program. While there aren't formal statistics about increases in skill and confidence levels related to the Dog Tales program, the teachers, parents and the students themselves clearly recognize the benefits.

“Dwight helped me,” said Liam. “Back then I couldn't think of any stories and now I think of more and more stories. He gave me confidence.”

Simone's favorite thing about the program is discovering new stories about animals to read with her pet partners. She reads to her dog, Buddy, at home and says that Buddy prefers animal stories as well. Liam also reads at home with his dog, Arcada, and echoes this belief.

“I know that, because if I read a story that is not really an animal story she goes to do something else,” said Liam. “But if animals are in the story she will listen.”



Jennifer Horsman, volunteer coordinator for Compassionate Canines of Central Oregon and a member of the Alliance of Therapy Dogs, sits with students at Elk Meadow as they take turns reading to Conguita.



INSERT NAME?  
enjoys a quiet  
moment reading  
with stuffed friends.

Lydia does not have a dog at home, although she does have six cats.

"Cats are not as good at reading as dogs are," said Lydia.

A stuffed animal can sometimes be a good substitute to cuddle up with and read, at home and at school.

*Dwight*  
By Lydia Unruh

*Tic Toc*  
I watch the clock

*I can't wait to*  
read with Dwight

*I love him as much as*  
my favorite blue bunny  
stuffed animal

*He has floppy ears*  
like big marshmallows

*We write stories and poems*  
I give him big  
Hugs

*I'm always happy & excited to*  
see them

*Mrs. Lundgren is my*  
special friend

*They make my heart*  
happy

As for the dogs themselves, Horsman said that they enjoy reading with the children, especially the attention and belly rubs.

"What I have observed through the years of volunteering is that they want to get into the car and once at our designated location they want to get out of the car and lead the way to where we are volunteering. And, it is not just about the reading. These dogs engage each child on so many levels. It is up to us as handlers to keep up, take notice, and follow our dogs' lead."

While there are always children who could benefit from the one-on-one sessions and presence of the non-judgmental dog and handler, participation in the program is limited by the number of volunteer teams. This year the program has two teams, which means four students will be able to participate.

"We select the kids that need it the most," said Korman. "The reasons they come into the program are as unique as the child, so no one set of guidelines applies to the kids we pick. But with reading they just might need

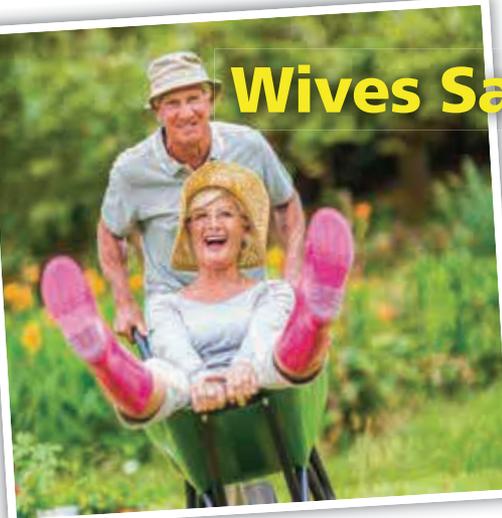
that extra push."

A real love of children and the desire to make a deeply profound impact are the character traits that Korman, Lundgren and Horseman feel would be a good fit for volunteers considering the program. And while the kids and dogs are the stars of the program, said Korman, it is the volunteers who make the magic happen.

"Like the cliché, you get much more than you ever give," said Lundgren. "Seeing the kids light up, seeing their self-esteem and self-confidence grow — when I think about the things we've done together it brings tears to my eyes."

To learn more, contact Jennifer Horsman at [j3horse@aol.com](mailto:j3horse@aol.com) or check out the following organizations:

- Compassionate Canines of Central Oregon
- Reading Education Assistance Dog Program (R.E.A.D.)
- Pet Partners, Read to Me Program
- Alliance of Therapy Dogs



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## Wives Save Lives!

So do husbands. In fact, family members are key to helping spot and prevent skin cancer. Here are some tips for staying safe in the sun:

- Avoid being out in the sun as much as possible from 10:00 am–4:00 pm.
- Wear sunscreen every day with an SPF of 30 or greater and reapply often.
- Wear sunglasses and wide-brimmed hats.

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