

Paws to Read in Lamorinda

By Sophie Braccini



Melyssa reads to Trevin under the supervision of Carol, the dog's handler
Photo Sophie Braccini

As she comes in to the special library room, Melyssa, a 3rd grader, is told that today she will read to Trevin. The dog is waiting for her with his handler/owner, Carol. He is one of the three canines present that day at the Orinda Library to participate in "Paws to Read," a program where elementary school children come to read to dogs.

The program has been running in Orinda for three years. "It was started in Salt Lake City many years ago," says Lin Look, the li-

brarian in charge of children's activities, "I heard about it at a conference and was immediately convinced of its value." Research shows that kids who are learning to read can become nervous about looking dumb around their friends. But with a dog, they start to relax and reading becomes easier.

The program will start in Moraga this August. Moraga librarian Linda Waldroup summarizes, "Children enjoy reading to non-judgmental canines."

"Dogs are not critical," says

Melyssa's mother, "they take the children for who they are." Paws to Read attracts children from the entire spectrum of reading levels. Martha, a 4th grader who was there that morning in Orinda, is a very avid reader, having completed the library summer program for her age in triplicate. During the session she read three books to her dog. "She takes any opportunity to read," says her mother. The little girl commented, "I love to read to dogs, you can see they really understand what you read."

The dogs involved in the program are family pets of many different breeds and their owners, who volunteer their time, have been certified in pet therapy. In addition to reading improvement, "Paws" shows kids how to relate to dogs as pets.

"Children are sometimes unsure," says handler Ginger Wadsworth, "and within a few minutes of petting the dog they come closer and start reading." This is why Look removed some of the restrictions other libraries have put on the program, she will allow kids with minor allergies to come to the program, as well as kids who are not used to interacting with pets and might be a bit nervous at first.

Wadsworth is on the Friends

Orinda Library board, and has two trained therapy dogs. She comes to "Paws" with her golden retriever – Willa – who is so excited about going to see kids. She's a big supporter of the program, and the Friends of the library have donated books, pillows, doggy treats, water for the handler and little certificates. "It is still a lot of work for the librarian," recognizes Wadsworth, "and Lin has done a fantastic job."

Waldroup confirmed that all the dogs in her program are certified therapy dogs as well. Most of the people who bring their dogs do other things with them, like going to hospitals and convalescent homes. There are therapy cats, too, and both Look and Waldroup would like to find some of these for their programs. They both want to connect with the local schools and reading specialists. The program is over for the summer in Orinda and will start again in the fall. After the August trial in Moraga, the program will be evaluated and is also expected to return in the fall.