

Libraries hope therapy dogs can help reading take root in young readers

By David Scholz



Photo David Scholz

Luca Akjeje, 9, reads as he pets Breeja, a labrador with the Alliance of Therapy Dogs, as part of the Lafayette Library's Read to a Dog program.

Luca Akjeje settled in next to Breeja. After collecting a graphic novel from nearby offerings, Luca commenced reading, laying a hand on the labrador's soft, white coat.

The experience for the 9-year-old youth in a back nook of the Lafayette Library children's area epitomized the goal of the "Read to a Dog" program. "It's about capturing young readers and enriching young minds," said Library manager Rob Tygett.

With handler Carey Carpenter of Lafayette sitting nearby, Breeja, also 9 years old, laid down her head and found eternal bliss in the moment as well. Carpenter brings in two therapy dogs known for their calm demeanor, on behalf of the Alliance of Therapy Dogs.

As Luca became more engrossed in his selection, Breeja came less the center of the encounter. Luca's grandmother, Susan Sisco, who brought Luca over the hill from Martinez, was thoroughly enjoying the comfort of the dog's presence too. "The dog is nonjudgmental and not telling (anyone) what to do," said Sisco. "It's a chance to relax, be a kid and read a book with a dog."

Sitting nearby, Sawyer Griggs, 8, of Lafayette, reacted as only a kid would. "I think it's pretty cool," she said.

Her caregiver, Kirsten Scheepers, called it "a great idea" for the "soothing and peaceful" experience it creates for youngsters as they enjoy reading a book.

Reading for some youngsters is as easy as rolling out of bed in the

morning; it's a skill that comes naturally. For others, though, it is a frustrating grind, full of starts, stops, and misfires. The greater one is engaged in the reading process, the more opportunities can be for this important life skill to take root. To that point, libraries around Contra Costa County are increasingly tapping into the calming presence of therapy dogs to help bridge that literacy gap.

Area branches, including the one in neighboring Orinda, which also brings in the therapy dogs, have long seized on the power of the pooch in creating a welcoming environment for readers of all skill levels to find reading a fun, relaxing and rewarding pastime.

Lafayette's Read to a Dog program offers 15-minute sessions on Jan. 23 and 30, from 3 to 4 p.m., and 15-minute sessions from 2 to 3 p.m. on the Jan. 24 and 31. Times can be booked online. With no-shows a possibility, there might be times available for families who decide to drop into the branches to check out the program.

Orinda's Paws to Read, offering 15-minute reading sessions from 4 to 5 p.m. on Thursdays, Jan. 18 and 25, and Feb. 1 and 8, is coinciding with the current county-wide Community Reads for Kids activities related to the book, "Dogtown," by Katherine Applegate and Gennifer Choldenko.

Starting in 2006, Orinda was the first library in the county to introduce the activity. Lin Look, the branch's children's librarian since 2000 and dog lover herself, was intrigued by the concept after hearing

how it was happening in Pleasanton and made the trek down I-680 to check out how it worked. Sixteen years later, she hasn't looked back and continues to make dogs a regular presence, much to the joy of young and old patrons alike.

For some who are reluctant, reading to the dog breaks the ice. And for the more competent readers, they just like hanging out with the dogs.

Learning to read is a lot about practice, and Look noted that depending on what one is reading and the reason why they are reading something can make it a task that is not fun. "And reading to a dog is a little more fun," she said. "(It's) a little out of the ordinary and it becomes a little more interesting."

Alle Porter, the children's librarian at Lafayette since December 2019, inherited the program and has kept it going, even during the pandemic when she recalled a youngster regularly read to a dog via Zoom.

Very relieved to have the in-person experience back, she echoed the values and virtues of the program expressed by her Orinda colleague. "The dogs are non-judgmental," said Porter. "If a child skips a word, no worry, they are happy to be there."

"The dogs bring a calmness to the environment," she continued.

In turn, for the children, the experience of reading and greater proficiency with skill "builds their confidence; You see the results carrying over to school," Porter added.

Looking ahead, Porter anticipates scheduling dogs at the branch during the summer break to bridge the gap and curb the summer slide parents dread. "Reading to a dog is a good break," said Look, who observed how area youngsters are under a lot of pressure to achieve and succeed. "If you don't have to perform, you can just enjoy reading the book or the dog, and that is the best of both worlds."

For more information about the reading with dogs activities, and to register online, visit local branch calendars at www.ccclib.org.

Business Person of the Year

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Ultimately, it was her desire to do work that allowed her to be with her kids and turn her passion into a sustainable business that drove her.

"I absolutely love doing this work, but the goal was always to make money comparable to what I made. It wasn't optional. I had two kids and there wasn't an alternative," Lucas-Alcalay says. "It was hard to be 42 and have people pat me on the head and say this was cute (when it was my career)."

Even though Lucas-Alcalay's business is doing well as a local fixture now, she endured some growing pains and learned some important lessons along the way. Her first year in business, she recalls selling or trying to sell 11 varieties of basil. "It was my dream garden, but people didn't know how to do anything with it and they didn't buy it," Lucas-Alcalay recalls. Feeling somewhat defeated, she talked with

a marketing manager who suggested she bring out her dehydrated herbs and put them in a mason jar with a bow on top for the holiday season. "I sold out in two weeks. That's how I found the 'business' in my business."

Lucas-Alcalay took it one step further to develop one of her most popular products. "I realized people wanted shortcuts. I started experimenting with the herbs from my garden and combining them with locally sourced salt to create seasoning salt to figure out how to make them taste good. People love that."

Lucas-Alcalay expressed gratitude for the Lafayette Chamber's recognition of her as the Business Person of the Year, and hopes that this will inspire community members to consider shopping locally.

Ben Canady is a repeat seasoning salt customer who stopped in the store to replenish his supply of rancho Moraga,

flakey sea salt and lemon basil seasoning salts. "I love this," Canady says. "I think there should be more places like this."

Siv Ricketts has worked at Hollie's Homegrown since August 2022. "I love that Hollie's has local, organic, sustainable and mostly consumable products. The things that aren't consumable are beautiful. I love working here and interfacing with the community," Ricketts says. "It's so well deserved that Hollie is the Business Person of the Year, but she's doing good for the community. I tell people that what you buy here is supporting local people, but it's a gift you can feel good about because someone's creativity has gone into that product."

Hollie Lucas-Alcalay will be honored at a special dinner Feb. 1 at the Lafayette Park Hotel. The evening will include a State of the City address by incoming Lafayette Mayor Gina Dawson. For tickets or more information, visit lafayettechamber.org.

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