

## Roxie the Labrador brings reading help, message to Jacksonville elementary school

Paws for reading: Students at Spring Park Elementary learn a lesson in being drug-free.

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Roxie sauntered in to Ginger Peters' first-grade class in Jacksonville like she owned the place, then plopped down on a red quilt as 14 students greeted her arrival like an old friend.

"Hi, Roxie" was the chorus from the Spring Park Elementary School students.

"You'll get a chance to talk to her. Do you like to read," said owner and Pawsitive Pets Reading Education Assistance Dogs volunteer Mary Harvey as she moved to a rocking chair next to the dog.

The 8-year-old Labrador retriever is an old friend here, part of the READ program where students learn by reading to the dog. This time, as part of the annual Red

Ribbon Week, Harvey read a poem titled "Paws-itively Drug Free." "That's what Roxie all wants us to be," Harvey said. "So Roxie wrote a special poem to read to you guys today on how to be paws-itively drug free." So familiar is the dog at the school that she is called "Roxie the Rock Star" everywhere she goes.

First-grader Jeffrey Zapot, 7, liked having Roxie in his class. "She is cute and she is really smart," he said. "It [the poem] really is cool and beautiful."

The Red Ribbon campaign dates back to 1985, held the last week of October as schools hold substance-use prevention activities as well as rallies and other events to get them to pledge to stay away from drugs.

READ is a program administered by Pawsitive Pets, a pet-assisted therapy service that goes to rehabilitation facilities, retirement communities, hospitals, hospice and schools. Roxie is part of one of about 20 READ teams that visit schools and libraries in Jacksonville to improve children's reading and communication skills.

Harvey, a professional public relations person when she isn't volunteering, embraced the offer to help during Red Ribbon Week. She drew a "Pledge to be Paws-itively Drug Free" that students could color and sign.

Instead of the usual READ bookmarks she hands out, new ones with Roxie's photo and "Roxie wants you to be Paws-itively Drug Free" were made for students after each Wednesday session. And instead of reading a standard anti-drug story, she came up with the poem illustrated with art done by a fifth-grader.

"I did a search for children's literature on the subject of being drug-free and found precious little that was interesting," Harvey said. "... I, in my typical fashion, got a bit carried away."

Principal Pam Pierce said they're long past "Just Say No." "It's just a new way to bring it to the children," Pierce said. "You can't do the same stuff all the time."