

Some dogs just have the talent of being good listeners

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Oceanway resident Linda Tipton was a Jacksonville Humane Society volunteer when she began visiting local schools five years ago to promote humane education.

She was always accompanied by Maggie, a golden retriever mix she adopted from the society. While visiting children in wheelchairs at one particular school, Tipton was astonished to see Maggie go from one child to the next and sit down so that each child could pet her. She hadn't been trained to do that.

Tipton said she believes Maggie sensed the children's special needs and acted accordingly. Maggie might have what it takes to be a therapy dog, she thought. She's gentle, kind and patient - qualities every successful therapy dog must exhibit - unlike

Tipton's other dog, Hershey, a chocolate Labrador, who is as rambunctious and impatient as she is loving.

She didn't follow up on the thought, but the idea pursued her. About a year later she attended a Humane Society volunteer meetings and heard a presentation on Pawsitive Pets (PawsitivePets.org), an organization formed to promote Reading Education Assistance Dogs in Jacksonville. READ is a national program that improves children's reading and communication skills by having them read out loud to a certified therapy dog. A representative of the Delta Society, an organization that certifies therapy dogs, was also at the meeting. By the following week, Maggie was certified. They spent their first year at Hendricks Elementary, a 45-minute drive for Tipton. So when New Berlin Elementary School opened two years ago on the Northside, she offered to be a READ volunteer there.

Pauline Gonzales, who now teaches second grade but was standards coach at the time, said that from the beginning the four children chosen to participate in the program saw reading in a different light. Their struggles with literacy turned into excitement about reading. Their teachers noticed an increase in their desire to read better, and their reading levels improved. Tipton even noticed some of the students helping one another.

This year they work with five second- and third-graders every Tuesday afternoon. Tipton gives them stickers to wear on their shirts with Maggie's picture that say "I read to Maggie." She also gives them certificates and pictures, as well as their very own "Maggie" stuffed animal to practice with at home. Maggie and Tipton also visit libraries and other settings, including a monthly program in the children's section at Barnes & Noble in St. Johns Town Center. Earlier this month, Lena Shaqareq encouraged her 5-year-old son, Jonathan, to participate. She didn't know about the program before coming to the book store that day and was delighted to discover it. Shaqareq was not a reader as a child and wants her son to be comfortable with books. As the program drew to a close, I watched Maggie rise to the challenge of 16-month-old Adrien Wyllie, who obviously doesn't read but loves dogs. He poked Maggie in the face, pulled on her fur and grabbed her around the neck. Maggie reacted like the consummate professional she is. She was calm and patient - and then she kissed him.