

Comfort Dogs Assist Children with Reading

By ERIC GROSS

Abraham, Beloved and Leah visited Denise Santalis' and Lucy Weidenhamer's classroom at the George Fischer Middle School in Carmel last week to assist children with reading support.

The three golden retrievers are highly trained comfort dogs, part of a network of some 130 dogs in 25 states.

Emotional support dogs provide comfort and support in forms of affection and companionship for an individual suffering from various emotional conditions. An emotional support dog is not required to perform any specific tasks for a disability like service dogs are. They are meant solely for emotional stability and unconditional love. They can assist with conditions such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder/mood disorder, panic attacks, fear/phobias, and other conditions.

The dogs that visited Carmel last week are affiliated with the Lutheran Church Charities, an organization that uses comfort canines to help calm people not just in the aftermath of a disaster but also in dealing with the daily stresses of life.

Regional Lead Donna Haines explained: "Comfort dogs are a bridge that gives people permission to open up and relax a bit by realizing that tomorrow will be a better day."

Haines told a class of some two dozen children the comfort dog program was inspired by an observation during the Lutheran Church Charities' disaster response work after Hurricane Katrina: "Volunteers saw people who risked their lives rather than part with their pets."

With that in mind; in 2008, the Canine Com-

fort Dog Program was created with four dogs. Organizers selected golden retrievers for their intelligence and lovable nature. In addition to visiting schools, the dogs meet with patients at nursing homes and hospitals, church parishioners and victims of disasters.

Last year when 19 children and two adults were killed in a massacre at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, the dogs traveled to the Lone Star State the following day and returned on the first day when school resumed, walking into the classrooms with children and staff.

Each dog undergoes 2,000 hours of training with multiple handlers.

Haines told the children: "As soon as their working vest goes on the dogs automatically know it's time to work. When the vest comes off, they are like any other canine companion."

As the children sat in circles, the dogs snuggled up to them while the boys and girls read.

This reporter was also asked to participate by portraying a nursing home patient. While seated in a chair and at the coaxing of Haines, Abraham placed his paws on my lap, reaching up and offering a wet kiss. The children and adults in the room all broke into raucous laughter. *(Photo, front page.)*

Reading teachers Denise Santalis and Lucy Weidenhamer were pleased with the canine's visit thanking former Carmel educator Sue Johnson for introducing them to the initiative.

Weidenhamer said: "The children find it easier to read to the dogs. The dogs sit there, laying on their mats and listen. There is no judgment when a student gets stuck on a word or stumbles through a sentence."



Comfort dogs interacted with children at the George Fischer Middle School last week. Photo, Eric Gross