

Thesaurus Rex

Dog Tale Times raises the bar for inter-species literacy.

Most 5-year-olds who stick their tongue out at people get scolded. But when Ricki the pug does it he gets books read to him. That's because Ricki isn't trying to be rude. His permanently protruding tongue is actually the by-product of several surgeries intended to correct a cleft palate. And it only makes him

look more adorable. Ricki is one of 10 specially trained dogs on the PAAWS (People and Animals Who Serve) team willing to spend his Saturday afternoons in the Eugene Public Library helping to improve child literacy. But he never comes to one of these events without an interpreter. That's why Ina Dunlap is

here. As one of five founding members of PAAWS, Dunlap acts as a part-time surrogate voice for the dogs, helping to encourage the children as they read.

"Occasionally the dog will have questions and comments, so we try to phrase it as the dog responding in a non-critical way," says Dunlap. "Sometimes I'll say things like, 'I don't think Ricki understood that. Could you go back and explain that again to him?'" The idea is to improve the child's comprehension.

This is Stacie Jasper's third visit to "Dog Tale Times" with her two grandchildren, Joshua and Dion. "They liked it so much the first time, they could hardly wait to come back," says Jasper. I'm somewhat skeptical of the children's enthusiasm until I see one of the boys round the corner gripping a book and sporting a mile-wide grin. "Ooh, there's Ricki," he squeals, and breaks into a run.

"Last year we had a lot of returning regulars who had their favorite dogs, and would get upset when that dog wasn't there," says Dunlap. Although there's another dog here today, Lilly, Ricki seems to be the undisputed star of the show.

PAAWS, an affiliate of Delta Society Pet Partners, is a non-profit organization bringing the benefits of the human-animal bond to the Lane County community in



9-year-old Alex Guerrero reads Lilly a tale.




Ricki the pug gets an earful from 7-year-old Cora Rios.

various ways. In addition to the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (READ) program held each Saturday at the library, the PAAWS team makes regular visits to Alzheimer's hospitals and end-of-life facilities, offering unadulterated affection to those who need it most. With so much research connecting pets to stress-reduction and increased health, it's no wonder Ricki and his non-critical tongue are in such high demand. **EW**

Dog Tale Times is currently scheduled to run through early December and is held every Saturday at 2 pm at the Eugene Public Library. Pre-registration is suggested but not required. To register call 682-8316. To contact PAAWS call Cindy Ehlers at 461-1188.

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