

Only in New Orleans: Therapy dogs visit Lighthouse summer camp



Photo provided by Leigh Pleva -- Benny the bulldog gets some attention from Lighthouse Louisiana camper Alexis Funk and his owner, right, Joy Sturtevant.

CANINE CONNECTION

By Annette Sisco

Community news editor

Up-close encounters with friendly dogs were a highlight for vision-impaired youngsters at the Lighthouse Louisiana's four-week summer camp recently.

The camp was held at the headquarters of the agency, in Uptown New Orleans, that works to provide training, jobs and support for people with disabilities, especially vision loss.

"The goal of the camp is to help our kids develop skills and adapt to their vision impairment, but also to give them opportunities for experiences that they may not

normally get,” said Jenice Heck, whose official title is vice president of vision rehabilitation services.

Heck also happily answers to camp director.

Lighthouse staffers also took the students on a riverboat cruise, the National World War II Museum and a bowling alley. Campers met with a music therapist, creative movement teacher and art teachers, Heck said.

But the visit from the canines was one of the most popular events held.

“We had one little boy who was afraid of dogs ... but after about an hour we had to pry him away from this dog. He was just giving him a bearhug.”

The face-to-muzzle interactions were courtesy of the Visiting Pets program, which brings gentle, sociable animals to visit people in hospitals and nursing homes, as well as a few summer camps for children with special needs. The animals are also the listening partner in the public library’s “Reading to Rover” series.

“This was our first year at Lighthouse, but it was a big hit,” said Claire Sommers, Visiting Pets program coordinator.

The children seemed to have a natural bond with animals, once they overcame their uncertainty, she said.

“I don’t think there’s much difference if you are sighted or blind for the pet, because the pet doesn’t know,” Sommers said. “They approach people the same way.”

Visiting Pets has 110 members. New members and pets are always sought after, Somers said. But working with children like those at Lighthouse, along with sick adults, means the program has to be very selective.

“We have a process we adhere to strictly for new members: an orientation, an evaluation, a new member workshop and a probationary period,” she said.

“The pets have to be calm, friendly and outgoing. They have to be capable of going into new situations with confidence. We test them for loud noises; we don’t care if they have a big long pedigree. That has nothing to do with what we do. We say we are looking for personalities, not pedigrees.”

The next orientation for Visiting Pets will be held from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. July 14 at the Harahan Senior Center, 100 Elodie St., Harahan . Registration is required; email paws4visits@gmail.com.

Handlers must commit to at least one visit a month, said Sommers. And, “We

would like them to be calm, friendly and outgoing too.”

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