

READING TO ROVER



STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT DUKE

Elise Filo reads to Scruffy during the Visiting Pet Program's Reading to Rover event Wednesday night at Algiers Regional Library. The event was part of the library's summer reading program. Children could either bring books or pick some from the library to read to their new four-legged friends.

Library reading program goes to dogs in Algiers

By **Danny Barrett**
Contributing writer

The quiet, studious nature of the Algiers Regional Library was interrupted for a first-of-its-kind experiment this

past week as the Visiting Pets Program began its Reading to Rover initiative.

The program encourages children ages 5 to 8 to read to dogs. The idea is to let the young readers get accustomed to reading their favor-

ite books in front of a noncritical and relaxed subject.

"The kids read to the dog for about 15 minutes out of a book either from the library

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Dogs also visit elderly and sick

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or one they bring from home," said Joyce Kleinfeldt, coordinator of the Visiting Pets Program. "They go off into a comfortable little corner and read."

Group volunteers provided all nine dogs that showed up. The dogs are accepted into the program based on how well they handle visits to hospitals and nursing homes, the program's primary activity.

"We take the dogs to hospitals and visit the children who are there," said Alison Cook, a

volunteer and owner of Beatrice, a rescued greyhound. "This is Beatrice's first time doing something like this, but she's a sweetheart."

Algiers associate librarian Anne Escobedo welcomed the pets, having read about a similar program on another library's Web site.

"The (Reading To Rover) program coordinator, Cindy Ruel, had seen it in a magazine. Then, on the Internet, I saw that the Salt Lake City Library was the first library to actually practice it with dogs," Escobedo said.

"We're just getting our paws wet here, but it looks good," she said. "Being with the pets is quite relaxing for the kids."

Lee Gaffney, board president for the Visiting Pets Program and owner of Scruffy, a mixed terrier, said he is a true believer in the concept. "It builds their confidence in reading aloud," he

said. "Reading is brought to a level the children are comfortable with. It also gives them exposure to dogs if they don't already have one."

Ruel, a first-grade teacher at Alice Harte Elementary School who brought along her mixed-breed dog, Peanut, watched as Elise Filo, 7, read the book "Buster" to Peanut and then gave her furry companion a treat.

"She has treats waiting after every book," Ruel said.

Started in 1987, The Visiting Pets Program offers animal-assisted therapy to nursing homes and hospitals throughout the New Orleans area. The nonprofit program is run through the efforts of its volunteers and its animal therapists, who offer unconditional love and attention to patients.

"We used to be part of the SPCA," said Al Bourgeois, vol-

unteer and owner of Fondue, a brown Yorkshire terrier. "They didn't want to continue it, and we broke off from them. The patients we visit in the nursing homes love the pets." Bourgeois said one nursing home resident spoke for the first time in three months after visiting with the animals.

At first, the children, along with their parents, seemed apprehensive of some of the bigger dogs. "He's kind of scary," said Joshua Brackins, upon seeing Beatrice, the greyhound.

But Nicole LeBlanc, a second-grader at St. Andrew the Apostle School, wasn't frightened. She brought her own reading material: a self-written, self-illustrated book titled "My Dog Della."

"I made up my own book. I also did the pictures for it," said LeBlanc, who said she took great pleasure in reading her first story to Peanut, a cocker spaniel.