



SHEILA STROUP

4-legged therapists listen up

On Wednesday evening, the "Quiet Please!" signs weren't in effect at the Algiers Regional Library. It wasn't because Scruffy and Daisy and Peanut were barking, though. It was because all over the children's area, kids were reading stories to dogs.

They read old stories, like "Angus and the Cat," and new ones, like "Dog Breath: the Horrible Trouble with Hally Tosis."

Guy Harris, a fifth-grader at Behrman Elementary School, read "Mrs. Donald's Dog Bun and His Home Away From Home" to a sweet-faced greyhound named Beatrice and her owner, Alison Cook.

It was a very long book, and Guy read it very well.

"I didn't have the heart to stop him," his mother, Dawn Harris, said, when he finally finished. "He looked like he was enjoying himself so much."

I watched Guy read and asked him afterward why he liked reading to dogs.

"Because they don't stare at you," he said.

Love and smiles

The idea behind "Reading to Rover," part of the Visiting Pet Program, is to help children feel comfortable reading out loud.

Kids, especially those who lack confidence in their reading ability, are often intimidated by reading to their classmates and their teachers. But reading to Della and Chester is easy.

"Dogs don't judge you, and they don't correct you," library associate Anne Escobedo said. "I'm a fanatic about giving children a wonderful library experience, and this is it."

The motto of the Visiting Pet Program is "Bringing love and leaving smiles," and that's just what the four-legged therapists do. The local volunteer group was started in 1987 to brighten the days of people in nursing homes and hospitals by bringing gentle pets to visit them.

"We've just expanded the concept, and it has been a spectacular success," head librarian Joe Clark said. "The parents love it, the children love it, and the dogs really love it."

Spreading the joy

It was hard to tell who was having more fun: the kids, the dogs and owners, or Anne.

"Where else could you see so many heartwarming Hallmark moments?" she asked.

She said the first time the dogs visited, she had mentioned the program to a teen-ager who is self-conscious about her speech impediment, and the girl showed up at the library.

"She ended up reading to every dog," Anne said. "Her mom was crying tears of happiness by the end of the night."

"Reading to Rover" has brought so much joy to everyone involved it will be held at the Algiers Regional Branch the fourth Wednesday of every month from 6 to 7:30 p.m. It also will be scheduled at other area libraries. Wednesday was a special night for Elizabeth Lilly, a second-grader at Alice Harte Elementary School. It was her seventh birthday, and everybody sang "Happy Birthday" to her before she read a book to Peanut Marie.

When she finished, I asked her what made reading to dogs so much fun.

"If you make a mistake, they don't tease you," she said.