

Viking Puppy Project

By Dr. Julie Lauck, Superintendent, Valparaiso Community Schools



Great ideas often come from simple beginnings. Our latest district wide initiative started with a ten pound Yorkie with a tummy ache.

I took my dog to the vet late last spring. Dr. Bill Donohue and I began talking about the fact that he and his clinic sponsored our one and only therapy dog.

The discussion quickly evolved into the benefits of therapy dogs in schools. I told Dr. Donohue that I would have a dog in every school if I could. Dr. Donohue responded with his generous offer to sponsor any dog we could place. He then added that he had a patient expecting a litter of ten English Cream Golden Retrievers. I looked at him and said, "I'll get every single one placed." He provided me with the contact information and so it began.

Within mere days I had eager members of my team wanting to be handlers. Within four hours of securing those handlers, I raised \$12,000 from local sponsors willing to help with the initial costs of purchasing the pups, setting up the working area at each school, and helping with the costs of training. In the end, we secured nine of the ten puppies from that litter. By the first day of school this year we had a dog in all except one school (we are currently working on that!)

Although the random beginnings of this project are remarkable, and the support of our sponsors and the on-going financial support from Dr. Donohue and the other veterinarians at Vale Park Animal Hospital, the real importance of this project is the support these dogs will provide for both students and staff. As Superintendent, I tend to get a bit of attention on opening day as students and parents are walking up to the schools. Well, this year that attention was totally usurped by

Eva, our therapy dog at Northview Elementary School...and I gladly let her take all the attention. To see the absolute joy on the faces of both students and their parents as they approached the front of the school where Eva was sitting just waiting for little ones to come up and pet her, was probably the best moments of any first day of school for me. From the moment the first timid kindergarten student walked up that sidewalk and broke out with a smile as he made a beeline toward Eva, I knew we were doing something extraordinary at all of our schools. Many schools have therapy dogs; however, not many (if any) obtain this many dogs, train them as a group, obtain thousands of dollars in sponsorships,



4th Grader
Elsa Biehn
and Eva

and have a veterinary clinic offer to support the costs of on-going medical needs of so many therapy dogs.

Often, the most difficult thing to overcome is gaining the support from the Superintendent or Board. Not only did the idea and initial financial support start with me, the superintendent, I received sponsorships from two board members and our school attorney. Although donations continue to come in for support of this wonderful program, we welcome additional donations for on-going care and supplies for the dogs. We are always getting calls from citizens asking how they can donate toward either a specific pup or the project as a whole. Donations are tax deductible and can be made to Valparaiso Community Schools Puppy Project and dropped off, or mailed to: Dr. Lauck, 3801 N. Campbell, Valparaiso, IN 46385.

So, how did we get this puppy project, as we call it, established and supported with non-tax payer funds? I first made the decision to target key sponsors – but not to just ask for money, but to give them an opportunity to sponsor a specific puppy. Like triple Crown thoroughbred Secretariat's owner Penny Tweedy as she tried to get her key donors to sponsor breeding rights, I went first to my top go-to community donors and made it clear that they were receiving the first right of refusal to sponsor this unbelievable opportunity to help students and staff. Not one refused to take advantage of this opportunity. I let everyone know, not as a point of obtaining credit but as a show of total belief in this project, that my husband and I were donating the first \$1600 to secure the pups once they were born. I wanted everyone to know how important this was to me as superintendent, and how important it would be for our students and staff. I am fairly accomplished at raising funds, but I have never raised \$12,000 in under four hours by sending seven emails out to our community. That speaks as much to the quality of our community as it does to the importance of this project.

The secured funds went toward the initial purchase of the dogs, supplies needed for the handlers to get set-up, and training. We connected with a local trainer, Lisa Bataska with Stoney Run Canine Camp, willing to train all of our pups at the same time. We use one of our elementary school cafeterias for Sunday evening training sessions. We refer to the Sunday training as our staff meeting. The pups are currently finishing Puppy 101 training, and will then test-out of that and into official Therapy Dog Training I and then II. When we engaged in this process, we were all aware (handlers and sponsors) that if any of the dogs did not have the proper demeanor after Puppy 101, the handler would

then have a very nice family dog; however, we have the highest expectations for our students, thus we expect the same from our puppies. So far, so good.

If you are not familiar with the powerful impact therapy dogs can make, I can tell you honestly beyond the plethora of research available, I have seen firsthand over the years the impact dogs make on both students and staff ... and the superintendent! I have witnessed non-verbal students say, "dog" as a pup snuggles onto a lap. I have watched smiles appear on faces of sullen or anxious students. I have heard adults say, "I just need to see that dog today!" I cannot think of a better way to grab the attention of 60 second graders on the second day of school than to tell them that if they get the right answer, Moose will do a trick. I found myself wanting to raise my hand...and I was pretty sure I did not have the right answer! Animals impact people in so many ways – comforting, calming, and companionship without any fear of judgement or rejection.

We have been cognizant from the start of the possibility of allergies or even fear of dogs by students and staff. Make no mistake, like we all experience in the business of education, we have a handful of naysayers; however, like we do with any other individual concern, we address it and keep moving forward because we know the positive impact outweighs the few concerns. Overall, our newest Viking Puppy Crew has caused a stir in our community – but a positive one.

I invite you to contact me if you have any questions, or need assistance in getting therapy dogs in your schools. I also invite you to follow our pups on Facebook and on our school website.

Finally, I want to give credit to our sponsors, veterinarian, breeder, trainer, and others – all of whom are integral in the success of this project: Thorgren Industries, Urschel Laboratories, Dr. Behrend Family Dentistry, Skillman, Gibraltar Design, SchoolGuard, Sarkisian Law Offices, Mark and Sue Hoffman, John and Carole Clark, Debra Fray, Kevin Cornett, Vale Park Animal Hospital, Carrie Schmidt (Breeder), Lisa Bataska (Trainer), BarkBox for monthly donations for our Viking Pup of the Month, and all the others who have generously donated money, toys, and treats. Donations are always being accepted through my office. In the end, I can honestly say that I am totally fine that smiling students runs right past me to hug one of our dogs – either way, it puts a smile on my face. 🐾



Want to Help? Donations are tax deductible and can be made to Valparaiso Community Schools Puppy Project and dropped off, or mailed to: Dr. Lauck, 3801 N. Campbell, Valparaiso, IN 46385