

No dogging it, for therapy's sake



Walter Bird Jr. photo

Jeanne Brouillette of Dog B.O.N.E.S. introduces Cody, a Shitzu, to "victim" Hannah Hendricks as part of a training program that trains dogs and their handlers as a therapy team. Nine-year-old Casey Johnson, who owns Cody, watches as she holds the leash.

GROOMING DOGS TO HELP OTHERS

BY WALTER BIRD JR.
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NORTHBRIDGE — This is one graduation that went to the dogs. Literally.

Eight canines and their owners last week graduated from a five-session workshop, having successfully completed a program as volunteer therapy teams that are now certified to work in just about any setting — schools, nursing homes, hospitals, libraries, for example — where a boost to the quality of life is needed.

The sessions were held at

Turn To **DOGS**, page **16**

Sutton woman brings program to Valley

DOGS

continued from page 1

Northbridge Middle School, led by Jeanne Brouillette, creator of Dog B.O.N.E.S. (Building Opportunities for Nurturing and Emotional Support) Therapy Dogs of Massachusetts.

As Brouillette explained, the program is designed to fashion a human-canine relationship that works in concert to help others — be they elderly, disabled or otherwise under the weather — pluck even just a little more happiness from their day.

"That's really our mission," Brouillette said before the start of her last Northbridge session on June 10. "We want to bring a little fun into someone's day as they recuperate, rehabilitate or simply live life."

Manu, a 130-pound Newfoundland owned by Nancy Visgatis of Sutton, has been doing that in recent weeks at the middle school, making weekly visits to a special education class taught by Marie Ouellette, and to an alternative education class at the school. Visgatis had Manu certified through Dog B.O.N.E.S. previously, and was attending this session with her 8-year-old daughter Jenna, who also graduated as one of four junior members. Jenna will be able to go with Manu, accompanied by her mother, to settings such as nursing homes, where Manu will do what he does best — bring a smile to someone's face.

"He really has become a part of the classroom," Visgatis said of Manu's work with Ouellette's class. "He's just become a friend to them, like a member of the class. He's exceptional with children."

His new friends have come to know Manu as "Big Bear," although "Sleepy Bear" might be more apt. While other dogs at the graduation yipped or jumped about, Manu rested contently near Visgatis, enjoying a belly rub when it came his way.

But the canine friends in Dog B.O.N.E.S. don't all have to have the same, docile personality.

"Any dog with basic obedience skills and likes people can go through this program," said Brouillette. "It doesn't matter the breed; it simply depends on how they're raised."

Apollo is one of those dogs that might not fit one's description of a therapy dog. A 96-pound Doberman Pinscher, he isn't as big as Manu, but certainly looks menacing. Looks, however, can be deceiving. While he drew gasps and fearful looks from people when he walked into the school with his owner, Mike Molinari of Worcester, Apollo walked right up to one stranger, nuzzled his pointed snout under his arm and begged for a rub.

"He loves people," said Molinari. "He wouldn't hurt a fly."

Now, with the help of Brouillette, Apollo might even be able to help someone.

Brouillette started Dog B.O.N.E.S. out of her Medford home in May last year after growing disen-

chanted with the national organization she had belonged to.

"I was just getting no support on where to visit," said Brouillette, who owns a golden retriever. "I thought I could do it better."

So she spread the word, posting flyers in veterinarian hospitals and with dog groomers. Brouillette held a free workshop and was happy to see eight people show up.

"We have 100 volunteers now," she said. "I thought I'd have 25. I figured that would be pretty good."

The cost for a five-week session such as the one offered in Northbridge is \$25. Membership is \$20 annually, and brings with it insurance and I.D. tags for the dogs. Upon graduation, handlers receive a membership card and business cards for distribution. The dogs are given a bandana to be worn around their necks. Other equipment, such as a vest for dogs, is available for purchase through Brouillette.

Training for the dogs includes exposure to the kind of equipment, such as wheelchairs and walkers, found in hospitals and nursing homes. Their handlers learn how to introduce the dog into a new setting and what to expect. It is important, said Brouillette, that each handler be independently certified with his or her animal. One person, for example, can't be certified and then send his or her dog to a nursing home with a friend or family member.

"Dogs are individuals. They may behave differently with you than they do with me," she explained.

Visgatis was able to lure Brouillette to Northbridge for the class, rather than have trainees head to Medford.

"I thought there was a strong need in the Valley for this," said Visgatis, who said she became involved with Dog B.O.N.E.S. to "fulfill my need to give back to my community."

Sharon McMahon of Uxbridge said becoming a therapy team with her dog, "a mutt" named Marty, has proven that the disabled can help the disabled. Marty, she explained, was found as a puppy on the



Walter Bird photo

Mike Molinari of Worcester and his dog, Apollo, say hello to Hannah Hendricks at last week's dog therapy training session.

side of Route 9 with a fractured leg. The limb eventually had to be amputated, but Marty's spirit wasn't, as was evident when the dog hopped over to a "victim" during a portion of graduation exercises to introduce himself.

"I've been asking about Marty becoming a therapy dog for a while," said McMahon. "He already does so much to help my nephews and nieces."

Carol Johnson of Northbridge thought the class would be a fun way to do something "special" with her daughter, Casey, 9, and their dogs, Cody and Gavelston.

"I work with incarcerated youths, and I thought it would be fun to bring the dogs to work with me," said Johnson, who learned of the program through Visgatis. The women's daughters are schoolmates. "And I thought it would be a fun thing for us to do together and maybe bring the dogs to one of the local nursing homes and spread a little cheer."

For more information about Dog B.O.N.E.S., visit www.therapydogs.info.