



Gabby had three dogs vying for attention! From left to right: Toosie, Zeus, and Libby.

Landenberg ladies have gone to the dogs

Their volunteer efforts at Oxford Public Library are paying off for children and pets

By Nancy Johnson
Staff Writer

It may be intimidating for a child to read out loud in front of a classroom, but it's amazing to see them do so when they have a different audience – specifically one with four legs and a wagging tail! Yes, they may be known as “man’s” best friend, but there are a few ladies from Landenberg that would tell you differently.

It all started back in the Fall of 2009 when Barbara Hoffman’s dog Libby became certified by the Reading



Photos (2) by Nancy Johnson
Makenzie, 5, captures Toosie’s attention with her book Five Sweet Strawberries.



Brian quickly makes friends with Libby.



Photos (2) by Nancy Johnson

Mary Katherine is only 3, but she is eager to share her book with Libby.

Education Assistance Dog (READ) program. After an outreach by the library, Barbara, a former librarian, and several other local dog owners, kicked off a READ program at the Oxford Public Library in the Spring of 2010. Originally, the program started out just one Saturday a month. It wasn't

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Gone to the dogs...

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long before there were so many requests by children who wanted to read to the dogs that it was determined that it should be expanded to be a weekly program.

Knowing they would need more reading partners (dogs), Barbara began looking for prospects, where else but at the Landenberg Methodist Church.

"Barbara began recruiting because it was obvious that the program was successful and they needed more help," explains Kathy Boris. "She approached me after church and said she knew I had a very well-trained dog and asked if I would be interested."

Helen Whipple, also a Landenberg resident, heard about the program at church as well. "I don't regularly attend Landenberg Methodist, but in the summer I like to visit various local churches," she says. "It just so happened that on that day they were handing out flyers inviting anyone who had an interest to attend an informational meeting with KPETS."

KPETS (Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services) worked with the library volunteers and observed each dog in a variety of circumstances to determine if they were suited to be therapy dogs. The non-profit organization evaluates and registers volunteer teams of pet and owner to assist in community health-related facilities, social agencies,



Courtesy Photo

Many of the Oxford Library READ dogs and their owners enjoyed a luncheon (with dog and people food) at Barbara Hoffman's farm in Landenberg. Front row, left to right: Helen Whipple and Bud; Andie Chalfant and Dodger; Kathy Boris and Zeus; Debbie Hornbeck and Beamer; Charlott Holek and Daisy; Barbara Hoffman and Libby. Back Row, left to right: Gene Hill and Peanut; Ken Pienkos and Millie; Jan Weatherford and Skye.

special-needs programs, schools, libraries, hospices, or wherever the human/animal connection may be beneficial.

By December 2010 there were enough volunteers to offer

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Photo by Nancy Johnson

Just follow the dog footprints to read with the dogs.

Gone to the dogs...

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the program, much to the delight of young readers and their parents, every Saturday. As a sort of kick-off of the expanded program, Barbara invited all the volunteers and their people to her Landenberg farm for a luncheon.

"It was Barbara's idea to bring everyone together to meet. She realized that there would be times when different dogs would be together at the library so she wanted them to get to know one another ahead of time," recalls Oxford Public Library director Ken Pienkos. "There were 13 dogs there – two of which were mine who are not therapy dogs. I brought them along because I thought if anything could incite an incident it would be them!" he laughs.

Ken reports that the expanded program is going very well. "Young children are just enamored with the dogs. Dogs are patient and not critical," he explains.

He believes offering the READ program every week really helps to foster a love of reading. "Moms have admitted to me that their child looks forward to it all week," he says. "Through the consistency there comes a loyalty -- with the dogs and the children."

"I'm sure we'll keep the program going," Ken emphasizes. "I hope we can even incorporate it into our summer reading program – One World, Many Stories," he adds.

Charlott Holck of Landenberg says that the kids aren't the only ones who enjoy the READ program. Her Tooksee, a nine-year-old beagle/boxer mix, looks forward to her trips to the library as well. "My house has always been full of adopted grandchildren, so she loves kids," Charlott says. "She usually curls up on her story blanket (a special one

just for reading at the library) and goes to sleep. Some of the kids say, 'Tooksee, you're not listening!'"

For the most part the ladies have found that the children are happy to read to any of the dogs, though Barbara explains that one girl was insistent on reading to her dog, a gentle mannered beagle, as they were reading a chapter book and she didn't want Libby to miss any of it.

"We've gotten such positive response from the parents," says Kathy. She adds that Zeus, her handsome 9-year-old tri-color collie, seems to love the READ program as much as the kids. "He gets a lot of attention from the kids here, he always comes in very happy."

Helen reports that Bud, her 10-year-old rescue dog of unknown background, enjoys being read to and thinks it's an extra bonus if the children take him for a walk.

"I wasn't sure how he would be because Bud wasn't raised with children," she admits. "But he adjusted to it quickly and seems to be especially fond of young girls. It makes me wonder if in the short period before we adopted him he may have been in a family with little girls."

Barbara keeps the schedule of which two dogs and their owners are at the library each week. "We can usually keep it covered if someone can't make it on their regularly scheduled week. But we could really use one more team," she emphasizes.

To learn more about the program, which is held every



Saturday from 2 p.m. until at least 3:15 p.m., call the library at 610-932-9625 or Barbara, 610-274-8123. A workshop for certification for handlers is being planned for the spring.

If your child would like to read with Bud, Libby, Tooksie, Zeus, or whichever of the other reading dogs is on duty, stop in the library and follow the dog footprints leading to the children's library.

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