



Writing workshop a pet project

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Ashley Kohr, 11, gives Pippa a quick pet before starting to write a story during a summer writing workshop recently at the New Oxford Area Library. Pippa was one of three animals brought to the workshop by the Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Service to help the children focus on their writing. (Evening Sun Photo by Meghan Gauriloff)
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Ernest Hemingway had about 60 cats wandering the grounds of his Key West home.

Even Mark Twain had his fair share of felines.

Maybe these folks were onto something that many therapists laud today. Pets are great writing and reading partners.

About eight students are taking part in a writing workshop held at the New Oxford Area Library and hosted by Keystone Pet-Enhanced Therapy Services.

Students work together for two weeks to write a

book, all while cuddling with Beamer, a Maine coon cat; Rosie, a collie; or Pippa, a Bernese mountain dog.

Mary Merrell, Margie Smith and Sue Adams of KPETS are hosting the workshop for young writers ranging from fourth to ninth grades.

This writing program, Merrell said, is one example of pet therapy.

As students learned the steps of writing their own book, the pets helped them maintain focus with their calming effect. They helped make learning fun and interesting, cuddling with kids as they developed characters and a plot, wrote and illustrated the story.

The program wrapped up last week. But at the start, students said their favorite part was the animals.

The dogs wandered around and visited each student during the two-hour session. They got plenty of attention as students contributed ideas and brainstormed the plot and characters the group will be writing through the program.

Beamer helped just like a typical cat - by lying in the middle of everything, and soaking up the attention.

Merrell said the animals are not judgmental. They'll just come up to someone for attention and sit calmly by while they write.

The first day, the students came up with a story and brainstormed the plot. The story takes place in the library.

The painting of a castle on the wall is actually a hologram in the story. It goes into a magical world. The librarians have been kidnapped and whisked off

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to this place.

But, with the help of Beamer, Rosie and Pippa, the kids



Beamer, a Maine coon cat, was another pet aide. (Evening Sun Photo by Meghan Gauriloff)
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go to that land to rescue the librarians.

As Beamer sat in the middle of the table, the students petted the dogs, and they plotted.

During the first week, they broke off into small groups, each taking a page of the book. They used the plot points they developed to write and illustrate their own pages over a few days, bringing the story together.

Ashley Kohr, 11, of Gettysburg and Chloe Rutters, 10, of Dover, wrote their page as Pippa lounged between them.

It's summer, and they were inside writing, but they love it because of the animals.

"With animals, you can pet them when you need to," Ashley said.

They quietly wrote, petting a dog or cat when they needed inspiration.

Therapy animals through KPETS also visit nursing homes, juvenile detention facilities and physical and occupational therapy centers.

Merrell said in a monthly reading program, also held at the library, children read to dogs and to Beamer. It helps them gain confidence in their reading skills.

A dog will just hang out and not be judgmental if you're reading slowly or mispronounce a word. Alzheimer's and dementia patients they visit will remember the dogs' names but not recognize the handlers.

They have a calming effect on people, she said.

"Animals help people forget their problems," she said. "They work harder for what they want to accomplish."

Improving reading skills is just one accomplishment. She said therapy animals also help those in physical therapy take that extra step when learning how to walk again. Unconscious patients respond to the feel of the fur, and can often recognize the animal when they wake up.

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