

The Herald Expositor

Gaining confidence with canines

With Best Friends 4-H, disabled kids hone dog-training skills, compete in canine therapy show

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BERRIEN SPRINGS — Waiting for the judges' call Tuesday, Coloma resident R.J. Kibler might have had reason to feel nervous.

That's because the 11-year-old and his team leader's two-year-old Shetland sheep dog, Winston, were just moments away from hitting the obedience track at the Berrien County Youth Fair's dog and cat show tent.

But R.J. was ready to show the skills he'd been honing since June as part of the Best Friends 4-H Club's canine exhibitors with disabilities show.

"The biggest thing is doing the agility, because you've got to run the dog through the course, and make sure that he does his job," R.J. said.

Volunteer team leader Mae Reed, who

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Don Campbell / H-P staff

Omarian Burton, 6, from Benton Harbor, gets ready to show Cocoa Puff during the judging of dogs exhibited by disabled children on Tuesday at the Berrien County Youth Fair in Berrien Springs.





Don Campbell / H-P staff

Sharon Roberts (right) helps Rebecca Nielson, 8, from Bridgman guide Shy Boy, a dachshund, through an obstacle course during the judging.

BEST FRIENDS

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stood ready to accompany R.J. and Winston, had no worries, though.

"We'll find out what a good job you can do," said Reed, of St. Joseph.

R.J., who has attention deficit/hyperactive disorder, was among 13 residents with disabilities participating in Tuesday's show.

The competition allows them to use life skills that will pay dividends in the real world, according to Best Friends 4-H co-coordinator Linda Shannon-Chaillet.

"These kids are living in the normal world, where it is normal for them to function with a disability," Shannon-Chaillet said between rounds. "We run it just like the exhibits in a normal dog show, except that this is a therapeutic judging program."

Participants had the chance to win a grand champion or reserve grand champion award after competing in agility, costume and obedience rounds.

However, the overall priority is on education over recognition, which is why all participants get a ribbon or plaque for having the courage to take part, Shannon-Chaillet said.

"We started on this during the first week in June. This is what they work for," Shannon-Chaillet said. "This is their 4-H project."

Having the fair's support

for such a program makes all the difference too.

"This is what the Berrien County Youth Fair is all about," Shannon-Chaillet said. "This is also the only fair that I know of that has a canine therapy judging program."

Entrants are scored on their attentiveness to judges' commands, how well they work with their dog, and the animal's completion of its agility and obedience tasks, she said.

For Coloma resident Veronica Clemons, learning how to work with Sprocket, a 13-year-old Jack Russell Terrier owned by her team leader, Hailey Traywick, proved educational in more ways than one.

Asked what brought her to the show, Clemons replied, "My cousin was in 4-H, and I liked it a lot. Next thing I know, I'm here. I really like

dogs, but I didn't know how to handle them."

Clemons, who has bipolar and mood disorders, said that the agility competition has definitely been the trickiest aspect.

"Just trying to get the dog to go through the hoop is interesting, because it didn't always go through," she said, laughing.

For Buchanan resident Barbara Jared, watching her 15-year-old son, Jared Shuck, grip his dog's lead without help is a powerful and meaningful experience, since he is blind, and also developmentally disabled.

"We had one boo-boo out there," Jared said, after walking the obedience track with her son and his team leader, Paige Irwin, of Eau Claire. "But we just like to have fun, and I think he did great."

For Best Friends co-coordinator Vicki Williams, the

Upcoming Berrien County Youth Fair events

Today's highlights

2-7 p.m. — Style Show, Home Ec. Bldg. 16 *

5:30-7:30 p.m. — Lake Effect Jazz Big Band, Al Barbott stage

6 p.m. — Toni Michelle, Al Barbott Stage; vintage baseball, House of David vs. Blossomtime queens, yellow lot; 98.3 The Coast Talent Show, 15- to 18-year-old competition, USA/Ag-Expo Bldg. 34

7-9 p.m. — Lake Effect Jazz

Big Band, Al Barbott stage

8 p.m. — Charlie Daniels Band & Eric Church, grandstand, tickets \$30 & \$25, all seating reserved

Thursday's highlights

3 p.m. — Pedal Pull — South end of commercial buildings; llama judging, showmanship & costume, show arena

3 & 4 p.m. — Toni Michelle, Al Barbott Stage

5:30 p.m. — Aurora PD

Pipes & Drums, Al Barbott stage

6 & 8 p.m. — Streudelmeister's Polka Band, Al Barbott stage

7 & 9 p.m. — Lighthouse Chorus, Al Barbott stage

7 p.m. — Square Dancing demo, USA/Ag-Expo Bldg 34

8 p.m. — Skid Row with special guest Firehouse, grandstand, tickets \$20 and \$15, reserved and general admission

show is a constant and powerful reminder of its motto, "If the map and the terrain do not agree, believe the terrain."

Williams got involved about a decade ago, when a friend stopped by her former business, Twin Cities Animal Grooming.

She is now the co-owner of Muttterly Love, in St. Joseph, which also serves as the club's meeting and practice space.

"She (the friend) just came in and said that the club needed more volunteers, and told me to try it," Williams said. "I liked it, and I haven't stopped coming ever since."

For information about Best Friends 4-H Club, call Shannon-Chaillet at 934-0462, or Williams at 983-6888.

More information is available at the club's website, www.bf4hclub.com.