

Special dogs meet needs of special kids

By A.L. HENDRICKSON
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David Dynes has made a difference.

Dynes, 18, has Down syndrome. When, in 1988, he showed an interest in working with dogs and learning more about them, his mother, Patty Dynes of Galien, contacted the national 4-H offices for information about dog clubs for handicapped kids. None existed, she learned.

So she worked through the necessary paperwork and formed the basis for what is now the Berrien County "Best Friends" 4-H club.

The club is one of a kind. Special needs kids throughout the county are eligible to participate. Club members range in age from 8 to 25 years and exhibit a variety of handicaps including Down syndrome, hearing and emotional impairment, and physical disabilities. Best Friends, a name chosen by the members themselves, provides the opportunity for these children to learn about dog training and handling in a safe, supportive environment.

This year, the club is under the leadership of Cheryl Norvell of Berrien Springs and her assistant, Diane Dings of Eau Claire.

"Participants work closely with the same dog the entire season," Dings said. "The kids may use their own dog, or volunteer dogs are available to those without an animal of their own."

The group meets regularly throughout the year. At weekly hands-on meetings from the beginning of June through the end of August, members practice dog handling skills. During the winter, local radio station WHFB-FM provides a monthly meeting place and

helps sponsor and promote club functions. The dogs aren't at all the monthly meetings. Instead, the time is used to teach the kids about dog grooming and health and the different breeds. Regardless of the activity, however, safety is always stressed.

"We stay in touch all year round," Dings said. "The kids have different abilities. We try to make the meetings fun, even for the kids at the lowest level."

Kay O'Daniel, Michigan Coordinator for 4-H Handicapper Programming at Michigan State University, is quick to praise the pairing of dogs and kids.

"Dogs have made their mark," she said. "In addition to being useful as working dogs, they are also valuable as companion animals. The kids get a lot from working with the dogs. And they also benefit from the information the 4-H club provides."

Norvell and Dings can both vouch for the program's positive impact.

"It's great to see the progress the kids make from the beginning of the summer when they are just starting to get to know their dogs to the end of the summer when the kids and dogs work as a team," Norvell said.

Dings agreed.

"It's wonderful to see the kids with something that has finally identified their good qualities. The kids and dogs really communicate," she said. "It's also great to see a dog with no formal obedience training doing the work — going through the patterns — listening to his handler."

Dings, who began working with the club after seeing an article and thinking that it might be a good way to keep her dog sharp on her

ring-work, couldn't be more pleased.

Norvell became involved with the club in much the same way as Dings. Two years ago, her family included Benson, a retired Michigan State Police narcotics and tracking dog. Norvell felt that a little work on occasion would help keep Benson active and alert.

Since she was pursuing studies in special education at the time, the club seemed like a natural outlet for both of them.

The weekly summer meetings culminate in a dog show at the Berrien County Youth Fair. Club members participate in three handling classes, which combine elements of showmanship and obedience and a costume fun class. This year a new obstacle course class will be offered.

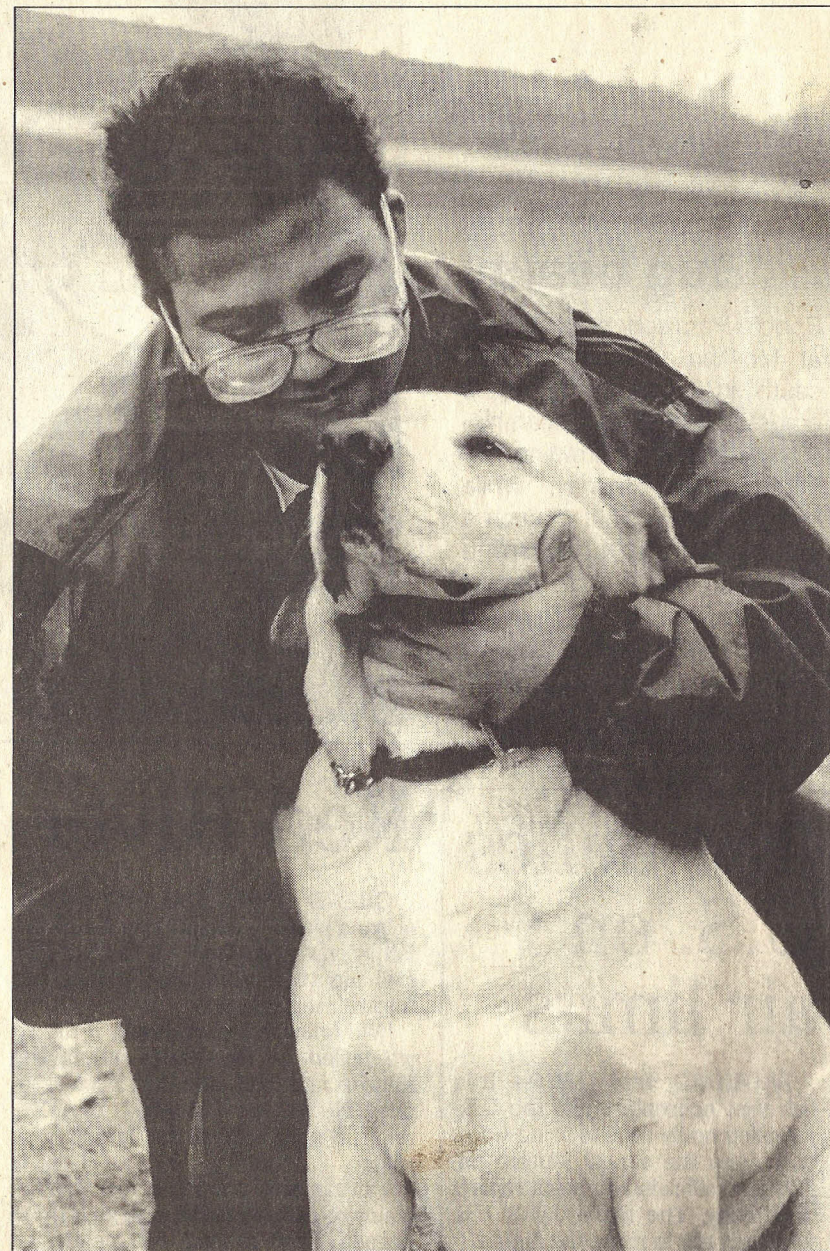
"The entire program follows the normal 4-H program," Norvell said. "Even the judging. The judge may be a little more lenient, but the requirements are the same."

Before they show, the kids are quizzed over what they have learned during the year. A page is compiled for each child, listing the disability and difficulties that child has and stating what each child knows, and is given to the judge before judging.

"We encourage the judge to focus on what the kids know," Norvell said, adding that the club emphasizes what each child can do, rather than highlighting shortcomings.

For more information about "Best Friends," call Norvell at 428-2077 or Dings at 944-1477.

Berrien County's 4-H extension office, at 429-2425, has more information on 4-H activities for handicapped children. Or contact Kay O'Daniel at Michigan State University, (517) 355-0180.



Sheila LeBeau photo

GOOD FRIENDS: David Dynes was instrumental in the creation of "Best Friends," a 4-H club that puts handicapped children and dogs together. Dynes, who has Down syndrome, and Bubba, a yellow Labrador retriever, have spent a lot of time together over the years.