

Best Friends helps special kids learn special skills

By JUANITA GREENE / H-P Correspondent
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Kids with disabilities can compete and show their dogs in the Berrien County Youth Fair in much the same way as other children. But while they train their dogs for competition, they're learning valuable, common-sense skills in the process.

In the Best Friends 4-H club of St. Joseph, kids are taught basic obedience commands to make their dogs sit, stay and come when called. They also learn how to run their dogs through an adapted agility course.

"It's teaching the kids the dexterity they need, improving concentration, and having a pattern of thought," said team instructor Sandi Waldron. "Outside of that, we're teaching the kids some real life skills. The kids come from all different backgrounds, and some of them don't have basic social skills, like saying 'please' and 'thank you.' But they're all giving, and very supportive of each other."

Co-coordinator Linda Shannon-Chaillet said parents see improvements in their children's abilities after only one season in the club.

"Parents will come up afterwards and say their child's self-esteem has gone up and they're doing so much better in school this year," she said. "Another parent said they couldn't believe their child's concentration level, and another parent said she couldn't believe the good manners."

The disabilities the kids have are varied, ranging from Down's syndrome and ADHD to being paraplegic, quadriplegic and hydrocephalic.

"Some of the disabilities are severe and some are minor," Waldron said. "You'll see kids in wheelchairs. We have a lady who is wheelchair-bound as well, so she teaches a child who is in a wheelchair, and the two can relate very well. She's very successful at it."

According to Shannon-Chaillet, the program provides experiences that disabled kids might never get in today's world.

"There are three steps," she said. "To give an educational experience to youth that might otherwise be omitted from dog competition and denied the experience and growth it provides, to give the club members an opportunity to learn about dog training and handling in a safe yet supportive environment, and to focus on building positive relationships between club members and their dogs."

The dogs used in the program typically belong to the team instructors who come from all

over Berrien County.

"There are pure breeds there, and a lot of them have come from a shelter, pure breeds and mutts alike," Waldron said. "The dogs don't come in being perfect, they have to be trained. They have to have at the minimum a good canine companion certificate."

Most of the dogs have been in the club for at least six years, had years of training, and are also registered therapy dogs. Grace, anatomy instructor Rosie Meister's Siberian husky, has her good citizenship award as well as being registered with Therapy Dog International.

"We got our dog in our church parking lot," Meister said. "She had been hit by a car. She was about 30 pounds underweight, loaded with ticks, had a broken pelvis and dislocated back. But we fixed her up, and now she's a healthy 70 pounds. She loves the kids, and they love her, too. She's perfect for this."

Meister joined the club three years ago and has been involved ever since.

"I had friends that were in the club, and I just went along to see what it was like," she said. "I like dogs and I like kids, but I didn't think I'd be able to participate as one of the instructors because I'm kind of handicapped, I walk with a crutch myself. But I talked to Linda, and she had no problem with it."

Meister teaches anatomy to the kids by making the subject fun and interesting.

"I try to make a game out of it to get their attention, because some of them have short attention spans," she said. "I'll split the group into two and have a challenge for each team. I'll say the name of the dog part and they'll have to touch it and repeat what I said. They like the competition, and they seem to learn more that way."

Children can start the program at the age of seven, and can compete in the fair until the age of 25. After that, the club member is usually worked into the role of activity leader. The club plans to have its own show this year, where the older students can also compete.

"There are two sections in the group, the students who are preparing to enter the fair and the activity leaders who are students that can no longer enter because the fair stops at 26 years of age," Shannon-Chaillet said. "Their sole purpose is to train any new dogs that come into the club for future teaming up with a new student. These activity leaders are all disabled."

Each child is also paired with an adult team instructor as well as the specially selected dog.

"The team instructor is the one who teaches the child or activity leader how to train the dog," Shannon-Chaillet said.

"The team instructor's duty is to adapt conventional training methods to meet the student's needs."

Waldron said the kids learn everything that a 'normal' 4-H member learns for competition.

"We do it at their own pace," she said. "You have to be real flexible and sometimes pretty inventive to get the point across."

Volunteers are always needed, and the club has room for 10 more children. For more information, call Linda Shannon-Chaillet at 934-0462.

"The people who join us are hard workers, but we have the best time in this club," Shannon-Chaillet said. "I'm told by the parents that the kids go away happy, they're charged, and they're excited. These kids keep coming back year after year."