

Best Friends

By JUANITA GREENE / H-P Correspondent
Copyright © 2003 The Herald-Palladium
Sunday, October 26, 2003

When Bjorn Krebs of St. Joseph wasn't talking at the age of 4, his mother had him examined by a speech and hearing center, and Bjorn began attending speech therapy classes twice a week. But by the age of 7, he still wasn't speaking.

"He had severe expressive language disorder," Mari Krebs said. "He wouldn't talk at all." Then Krebs met Linda Shannon-Chaillet, co-coordinator of the Best Friends 4-H Club of St. Joseph. The 4-H club is the only program in Michigan that teaches dog training to children with disabilities.

"She said this program could really help him," Krebs said. "It would raise his self-esteem so he'd be more likely to talk."

Best Friends 4-H Club works with kids who have a wide range of disabilities, from Down's syndrome to ADHD to mental retardation. Children and young adults ages 8 to 25 participate in obedience and agility training in preparation for competition at the Berrien County Youth Fair each year. They also learn about dog anatomy, good sportsmanship and dog owner responsibility.

Kids can work with their own dogs or donor dogs, and each youth is paired with a team instructor who acts as a "teacher's aide."

Although Bjorn couldn't articulate some of the verbal commands used in dog training, Shannon-Chaillet said that didn't matter.

"Dogs learn body language more so than the verbal command," Shannon-Chaillet said. "You really don't need to talk with the dog, as long as you've got the hand signals down."

Bjorn worked all summer with the family's yellow lab, Cricket, along with the team instructor.

"I quietly told (the team instructor) that Bjorn doesn't need to talk in dog obedience, and that's not our goal this year," Shannon-Chaillet said. "The only thing I asked of him was to get a language he could use to talk with the dog. If its hand signals, fine, do it."

Bjorn and Cricket entered the Youth Fair competition in August 2001.

"I noticed at the beginning of the show that he was eyeing all of those trophies," Shannon-Chaillet said. "He took grand champion in costume that year and fifth place in obedience.

"All of a sudden, he grabbed his trophies, ran to his mother and said, 'Mom, Mom, did

you see my trophies? Did you see my trophies? Didn't I do good, Mom?

"They just broke down in tears."

Participating in the competition and winning those trophies somehow unlocked Bjorn's language disability. He's been talking ever since.

"He always thought he was dumb because he couldn't talk and express himself," Mari said. "This had a big impact on him. He came out of his shell. This club really helped him gain self-confidence and be proud of himself. This was finally something he could call his own."

Best Friends 4-H Club was formed in 1988, after Patti Dynes of Galien was unable to find a dog training class that her son, David, could participate in.

"I taught horseback riding for handicappers with the We Can Ride group," Dynes said. "David didn't want to ride -- he's legally blind -- and I think it was very tough for him to sit on a horse with the movement."

"But he really loved his dogs."

Dynes discussed the idea of creating a dog-training club with other 4-H leaders in the area.

"We already had the concept, because we'd been trained working with the horse program," Dynes said. "We just applied it to the dogs."

David, 24, was 9 when the program started. Throughout the years, David has worked with several of the family's dogs. He's currently training Cola, his chocolate lab, as a sight dog.

"When we first got Cola, he was 6 months old and really hard to control, so I did the initial training," Dynes said.

David took over from there, and worked with Cola in advanced obedience classes.

"David just completed his Canine Good Citizenship program with him," Dynes said. "He did that all on his own."

Dynes' youngest son, Marty, 15, is also a member of Best Friends, although his mixed breed, Minnie, is now retired.

"We just got a fairly young lab that was a rescue dog," Dynes said. "That's available to him, but we have to wait to see how they get along."

Marty has been working with a donor dog named Dottie, a greyhound that is brought to

the club.

"He usually has a different one every year," Dynes said.

Donor dogs vary in sizes and breeds. The program has used golden retrievers, Jack Russell terriers, Newfoundlands, Pomeranians, collies and the club's favorite, the "American dog."

"That's the politically correct term for mutt," Shannon-Chaillet said.

Tyler Cook, 11, joined the club a year ago. Denise Cook, Tyler's mother, said working with the variety of dogs in the club has been a great way to increase her son's self-confidence.

"At first, he was afraid of dogs," Cook said. "Now he has a healthy respect for dogs, he knows how to approach them, and he isn't afraid of them anymore."

Tyler said he likes the competition at the fair, and working with the dogs in the ring.

"I think the BCYF is one of the few fairs that has 4-H clubs with dogs that work with kids with disabilities," Tyler said. "It's very fun because anybody can walk in and watch the dog show."

The Best Friends 4-H Club wrote the guidelines for judging disabled children on obedience and agility. Each child who competes receives a trophy.

"We make sure that every child gets something," Shannon-Chaillet said. "It's not because they don't deserve it, because it is an accomplishment for these children to just get the courage to go in and stand before the judge."

After the age of 25, the participants are no longer eligible to compete in the fair's show, but they can be promoted to the position of activity leader.

"Their job is to train new dogs for future pairing so we don't leave them behind," Shannon-Chaillet said.

As they work with the dogs, the youths form a bond of trust, respect, companionship and love.

"The program helps their self-esteem, their socialization, and helps them focus so it helps with teaching," Dynes said. "They get this relationship with the animal, they meet a lot of other people that they become close to, and it's something they have control of. They're saying what's going to happen.

"It's just a wonderful thing."

Classes are held at the Whitcomb Tower in St. Joseph, from the second Monday in May to the second Monday in August.

Holding the classes at the senior citizen residence fulfills several purposes.

"This way, Best Friends is also meeting our community needs," Shannon-Chaillet said. "4-H has a standard that, as a club, you have to go out and improve the community. By entertaining the senior citizens, we are meeting that 4-H pledge.

"Also, as leaders of Best Friends, we have to provide a safe environment for the dogs and the children," she said. "We work in an old swimming pool, so if any dog gets loose, they can't go anywhere. And the entrances are blocked by the senior citizens."

Best Friends 4-H Club also participates in promoting dog education in the schools. Several 4-H leaders and activity leaders take different dogs into kindergarten up to sixth-grade classrooms.

Club leaders teach students how to approach dogs, recognize body language to tell if a dog is angry or friendly, and the do's and don'ts of owning a dog. Shannon-Chaillet distributes coloring books, bookmarkers, information on 4-H and a variety of literature for kids to give to their parents. For the fourth- to sixth-graders, she gives an assignment.

"I have a math worksheet," she said. "I tell them it takes \$1,000 a year to have a dog. I ask them if they have the money to do that."

Shannon-Chaillet points out the difference between such things as buying a dog from a breeder versus rescuing a dog from a shelter, the cost of food, vitamins, a crate, obedience lessons, leashes and collars.

"If we get to the children early enough and leave them the material, hopefully they're going to grow up and respect the animals," she said.

"That's what we're trying to do."

For more information about Best Friends 4-H Club, call Shannon-Chaillet, 934-0462,