

A Club for Best Friends

By DANA SLAGLE / H-P Staff Writer
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"Boy, come!"

That's just one command that Marjorie Nielson knows how to give her "best friend" Charlevoix, a black Newfoundland. Marjorie, 6, is autistic, which has made communication difficult for her. However, since joining the Best Friends 4-H Club of Berrien County, her communication skills have gotten a lot better.

"All of a sudden, she's talking, and you can understand her. She is communicating her needs and her thoughts," said Best Friends co-coordinator Linda Shannon-Chaillet.

Best Friends is a dog club designed to help special needs people, ages 7 to 25, learn about dogs and dog handling.

Marjorie's mother, Heather Nielson of Baroda, has not only noticed an "immense improvement" in Marjorie, but she's also noticed a change for the better in her other daughter, Caitalyn, 9, who is also a member of the club. Caitalyn is bipolar and dyslexic. The two sisters joined the program last year.

When Caitalyn first began attending the club, she had trouble concentrating.

"She's a lot calmer, and she's smiling more," Shannon-Chaillet said. "You can talk to her, and she's making eye contact."

Marjorie and Caitalyn are two of the nine students in the class, which meets for about eight weeks during the summer. During the eight weeks, students learn about dog obedience, anatomy, agility and good sportsmanship.

The students are paired with dogs that match their personalities. The students usually work with donor dogs or their own dogs. They're also paired with an instructor who works with the students and dogs on different tasks.

At the end of the session, students compete in a dog show at the Berrien County Youth Fair in August. The show gives students a chance to demonstrate skills they've learned.

On a recent Monday evening in the courtyard of the Whitcomb Tower Retirement Residence in St. Joseph, where students meet for class, participants worked on different skills. Some of the students worked on obedience training, and others worked on agility.

"This is the best part of the class -- mostly because it's fun," Shannon-Chaillet said of the

agility segment. "The kids love watching the dogs go over the agility exercises."

The students enjoy it because they are able to ask the dog to perform various tasks, like going through a tire, a tunnel or around cones.

"When the dog does it, it's an accomplishment for them," Shannon-Chaillet added.

Students in the good sportsmanship class learn communications skills.

"Some of our children can't stand to be touched, but they learn to shake hands. They learn good manners and look someone in the eye. Sportsmanship also teaches the students to build trust with the dog and the instructor," Shannon-Chaillet said.

The classes help students develop confidence and other skills.

Heather Nielson said the class has helped Caitalyn develop self-esteem.

"She feels good about herself," Heather said. "She's learning to guide the dog through obedience and agility. She's finding out her actions set a course of events."

She's also noticed changes in Marjorie, who is learning to trust others.

Best Friends co-coordinator Jane Evans enjoys watching students in the program make improvements.

"It's an absolute positive reward that comes from seeing the kids grow and grow and find something they can do and do well, within their realm of capability," Evans said. "We have no idea why it works, but it works -- you have a four-footed creature, and all they want is love."

Nielson is amazed by the progress her two daughters have made since joining the club.

"It's a huge change," Nielson said of both girls.

Last year, both girls received trophies when they competed at the fair. Although Nielson is happy that her daughters won awards, she's just as pleased that they participated in the competition. She's also looking forward to them competing in August.

"I'm not really concerned about them placing," she said. "I want them to be everything that they can be -- to be able to stand confident that what they have learned is valuable and for them to feel comfortable in their own skin --that's truly what this is all about."

To find out about membership or for more information about Best Friends, look on the Web site at www.bf4hdogclub.com or call 934-0462 or 944-3645.