

# Therapy dogs greet City College students to relieve stress

By MARCUS HEDENBERG NEWS-PRESS Correspondent  
December 4, 2014 6:20 AM

It's been said that a dog is man's best friend. Now, it may be the best friend of Santa Barbara City College students as a stressful week of final exams dawns.

City College hosted its first "Check Out a Dog and Lower Your Stress" event at the college's Luria Library on West Campus.

Ten trained therapy dogs were on hand to greet and be petted by students. The dogs were volunteered by All for Animals, a local nonprofit focused on bringing a little more happiness to youngsters' everyday lives through personal interaction with specially trained therapy animals.

Finals week is notorious for being one of the most stressful times at college, and Elizabeth Bowman, SBCC library director, said she has been exploring numerous forms of relief for students.

After all, "there's a lot riding on your education," Ms. Bowman said.

"It's hard to get into classes sometimes. You want to make sure you succeed," Ms. Bowman said. "Most students here are taking many. They might have a full load and a job. It's pretty uncommon for a student here to not be working at least one job, sometimes many jobs or supporting a family. The impact of not doing well can be pretty significant."

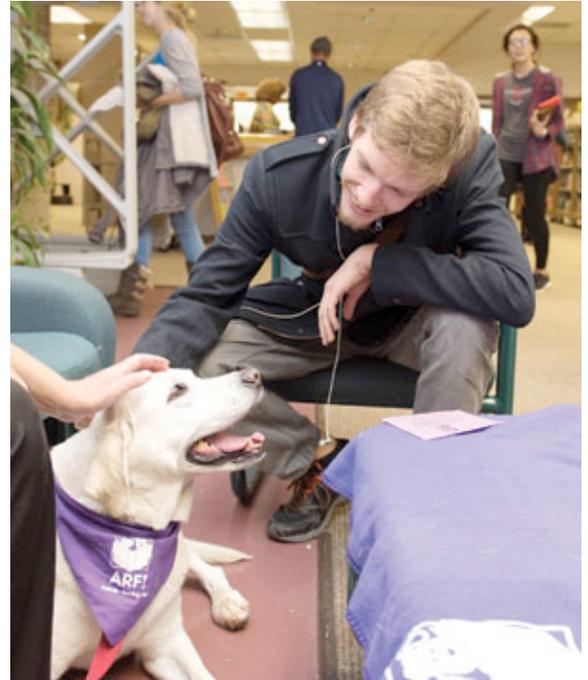
The idea is that an interaction as simple as petting a dog, or taking one out for a walk, will decrease the human body's level of cortisol, also known as a stress hormone, said Karen Lee Stevens, founder and president of All for Animals.

Although Wednesday marked All for Animals' first visit to City College, the group has plenty of experience in elementary schools across the county.

Last year, the group conducted a 13-week pilot program at Hope Elementary School with six dogs. Kids in first and second grades who struggled with reading literacy were selected and had their comprehension skills tracked through standardized testing methods.

As it turns out, exposing the kids to therapy dogs "increased their reading skills remarkably," Ms. Stevens said.

Surveys completed by teachers, the principal and volunteers also indicated improved competence, self-esteem and willingness to read aloud in class, she said.



City College student Leon Schoenfeld visits with Sandy, a white Labrador, Wednesday at the Luria Library.



Lily Rose enjoys her time with City College students Dean Bliss and Mia Pesonen  
MICHAEL MORIATIS / NEWS-PRESS

“We’ve seen first hand in the schools and at the Santa Barbara library what a calming effect our dogs have on the young children who are just learning to read, so I had a very good sense they were going to be equally powerful ... for the students here at City College.” Ms. Stevens said.

And judging by the sheer number of students flocking around the dogs Wednesday, and the fact that most of her 400 fliers had already been grabbed, the experiment seems to have been a success.

“(They are) so amazing. This is like the best day ever in the library,” said Cecilia Knoph, a foreign exchange student who is gearing up for exams.

Therapy dogs go through a five-week long training class sponsored by All for Animals, after which they are evaluated by an independent dog trainer, placed in schools or libraries for further training and eventually certified by Love On A Leash, a pet therapy nonprofit in Santa Barbara.

Ideally, students would be able to “check out” a dog for roughly half an hour, Ms. Bowman said.

While Wednesday was merely a test day for the dogs at the college, she said she hopes for many more visits.

“It’s going so well and we would be delighted to be asked back. We’d love to be here on a regular basis,” Ms. Stevens said.

email: [mhedenberg@newspress.com](mailto:mhedenberg@newspress.com)