

in the spotlight

ALL FOR ANIMALS - AND PEOPLE TOO

Santa Barbara reading program and nonprofit therapy dog training group celebrating 20 years

By Leah Etling

Growing up in Santa Barbara, Karen Lee Stevens recalls a pretty perfect childhood revolving around two of her favorite things: reading and animals.

"My mom fostered a love of books, and my dad fostered a love of animals. I was very lucky. Not all kids have that same opportunity," said Stevens, the founder and executive director of the local nonprofit group All for Animals.

As an adult, Stevens realized she wanted to impart some of the same positive experiences to children in the community. She started with basic dog awareness education, and later created a program called ARF!, which stands for "Animals + Reading = Fun!"

"About five years ago I heard about this concept of children reading to dogs, which started in Salt Lake City, Utah. It quickly went viral and now there are hundreds of programs around the country. I thought 'Wow, that's brilliant. I wish I had thought of that,'" Stevens said.

The idea is simple: Pair shy or struggling readers with a therapy dog, and have them read out loud to the animal without pressure from peers in a classroom or corrective direction from an adult. For so-called "reluctant readers" in first or second grade, a friendly four-legged pal can be a comforting and ultimately empowering presence.

ARF! was piloted in Santa Barbara's Hope School District thanks to a grant from the Santa Barbara Foundation. Results were carefully tracked over 13 weeks.

"It's a simple concept but it really has a very profound result. That is what we have found from the very beginning. The children's reading scores did improve, some of them quite markedly," Stevens said. "While we don't say it was only due to the dogs coming in once a week for 20 minutes, we can say that it clearly helps the children improve their

self-confidence."

As any dog lover will tell you, there's no better place to get positive feedback than from your furry best friend. Since the program began, about 4,000 local kids have had the chance to read to dogs.

Stevens, also an author of the children's book "Animals Have Feelings, Too!" volunteers with Sandy, a Labrador retriever and trained therapy dog. Sandy is a main character in the book, which helps children understand emotions and appropriate emotional response.

Today, ARF! is in place at several public and private schools in Santa Barbara, as well as weekly throughout the school year at the downtown Santa Barbara Public Library. Volunteers and their therapy dogs visit the library on Tuesdays between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m.

In addition to ARF!, All for Animals helps meet the local need for therapy dog training by sponsoring a training course with certified dog trainers Andrea Bratt and Anita Schermer. The five-week course costs \$125 for humans and their canine companions. After completing the class, dogs are typically ready for an assessment by a therapy dog certification organization such as Love on a Leash in Oceanside.

If they pass the evaluation, the dogs and their humans can participate in ARF! as "therapy dog teams in training." After 10 weeks of sessions, they are eligible to receive an official therapy dog certification.

"Some of those who have graduated have gone on to volunteer at Cottage Hospital, Visiting Nurse and Hospice, and senior-living care facilities. In the last four years we have trained over 350 dogs in this community," Stevens said.

All for Animals is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year and is accepting applications from prospective board members.

Find more information about programs and classes at <http://allforanimals.org>.



Photos contributed

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