

Paws Up for Pets

This story time audience can't clap, but it sure makes reading fun

Inside the downtown Boca Raton Library, siblings Mya and Kyle Laman take turns reading out loud from the pages of a book called *Dog's Colorful Day* by Emma Dodd.

The words come out easily and with enthusiasm to their attentive audience of one: a lovable English bulldog named Louie. Yes, this Fido fashionista often sports colorful fedoras and scarves, according to his pet parent, Laura Wasserman.

Watching nearby with unspoken joy is the children's mother, Marie Laman.

"Like many parents, I find it hard to get my kids off the computer and smartphones and put a book in their hands, but Louie is making it all happen today so easily," said Laman, of Boca Raton. "This is our first time participating in the library's Tail Waggin' Tutor program, and trust me, we will be back."

Her 11-year-old daughter, Mya, agrees. After the reading session, she declared, "Louie is adorable and I really enjoyed how he would look right at me when I was reading. He drooled a little and he sheds, but that's fine with me."

And what about reading the pages of a book versus reading the electronic type on a tablet or computer?

"Actually, I feel it is better to read a book than an electronic device because sometimes, the device is so bright it irritates my eyes," she says.

The Lamans share their home with a couple of dogs: Brandy, a 13-year-old Labrador, and Katie, a 4-year-old American bulldog.

Credit well-mannered canines like Louie for sparking genuine interest in reading books among preschool, elementary and middle-school-aged children enrolled in the Tail Waggin' Tutor program, which has been offered for the past nine years at Boca Raton's two libraries — downtown and Spanish River.

"When you sit down to



Louie the English bulldog listens to Kyle and Mya Laman as they read books to him during a Tale Waggin' Tutor session at the downtown Boca Raton Library. Photos provided



read out loud to a dog, there is no judgment," said librarian Amanda Liebl, in charge of youth services. "If a child messes up on a word or reads slowly, the dog doesn't care. With these dogs, we can offer a safe environment for kids to practice their reading and comprehension skills."

This dog-listens-to-child reading program features certified therapy dogs in all sizes, ages and breeds, including Labrador retrievers, Shih Tzus, cocker spaniels and mixed breeds.

There's a sweet senior dog named Sadie, who is blind, and the charming Nigel, a Lab who has a fondness for dressing up for every holiday. The dogs enter the libraries at their designated one-hour time slots Mondays through Thursdays and on Saturdays.

Their owners must undergo background checks, register

with the library and show proof that their dogs are therapy dogs with up-to-date vaccinations.

"Some of the dogs will just put their heads in the kids' laps as the kids read to them," says Liebl.

"We have thousands of books for the kids to choose from. The younger kids seem to like the illustrated books while the older kids like the chapter books where they can just pick up and read the next chapter to the dogs."

Wasserman is among the pet parents who see the value of bringing their therapy dogs to this library reading program for kids. Her dog, Louie, an English bulldog, suffered through pneumonia, an eye disease known as cherry eye, and needed surgery to open his nose in his first year of life. The upside?

"Louie became very

comfortable being handled by the veterinarian, staff and others," says Wasserman, of Boca Raton. "He is now 2 and healthy and whenever we are out, people stop and ask to take pictures with him. That's when I knew he would make a great therapy dog."

In addition to making his weekly visits to the library, Louie makes regular appearances at the Regents Park nursing home and Palm Beach School for Autism.

And, yes, this canine fan favorite has his own Facebook page, called Therapy Dog Louie & Friends.

"I think this reading program is a great idea," says Wasserman. "It's amazing how the kids love and are responsive to Louie. And, yes, he is a great listener."

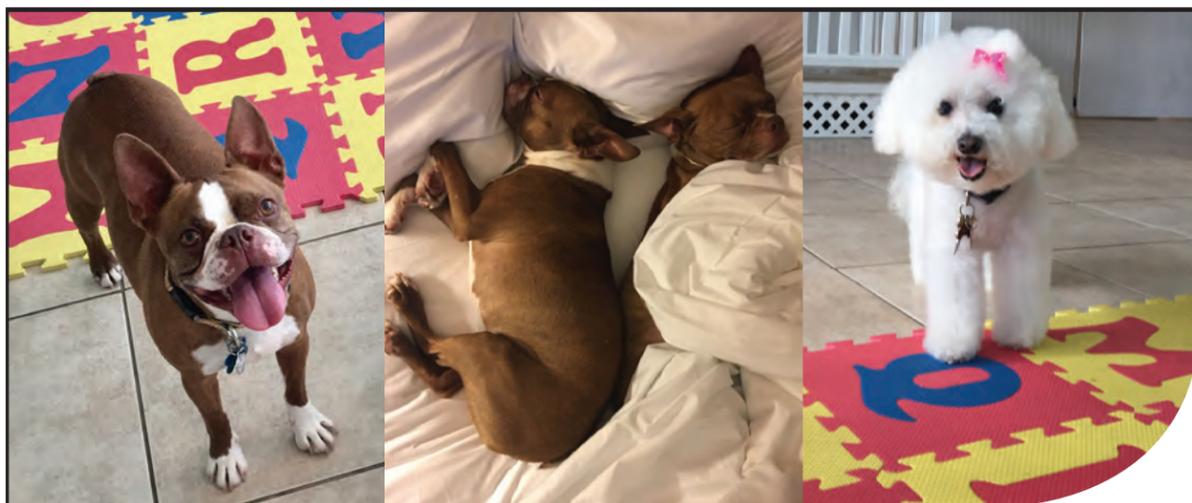
Dogs may never be regarded as wordsmiths, but they certainly possess a talent

for inspiring our youngest generation to read.

If you are interested in signing up for the Tail Waggin' Tutor program or have a therapy dog happy to be read to, contact librarian Amanda Liebl of the Boca Raton Library system at aliebl@myboca.us or 544-8584.

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Oh Behave! show on www.PetLifeRadio.com. Learn more by visiting www.fourleggedlife.com.



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