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Press Release FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Therapy Dogs Enhance Middletown Special Education Programs



Thorne Middle School student Shaugn Kenny pets the gentle giant, 144 lb, Nanook, a Newfoundland Therapy Dog who visited his special education classroom recently. Nanook is certified by Therapy Dogs International to bring comfort and calm to schools, hospitals and other institutions. His handler and owner, Vanessa Mulhearn of Rumson is also pictured. Nanook has his own website, blog and email address and is known to correspond with the students long after his visits.

Middletown: Several V.I.P. visitors have been making the rounds of the Middletown special education classes this school year. Answering to the names of Autumn, Benny, Cotton, Misty and Nanook, the respective Labrador retriever, smooth coated Portuguese Water dog, standard poodle, smooth coated collie and huge Newfoundland dog (that would be Nanook) are a hit wherever they go. All five have been certified by the Therapy Dogs International (TDI), the oldest registry for Therapy Dogs in the United States.

On Nanook and Autumn's recent visit to Denise Tressa and Christina Mazza's combined autistic classes, the students had the opportunity to relate to the dogs. They also learned about the breed from their handlers. Kim Kosko of Port Monmouth explained how she rescued Autumn from a shelter. Nanook's owner, Vanessa Mulhearn told the children that both dogs were bred to work in water—Nanook to rescue people from drowning and Autumn to retrieve things for their masters. The students were all given the opportunity to approach and pet the dogs while taking turns reading John Grogan's children version of *Marley and Me-- Bad Dog Marley--* aloud to the animals.

According to the TDI website, a special program called *Tail Waggin Tudors—Children Reading to Dogs*, helps children improve their reading skills. The children lose their self consciousness reading aloud while petting a calm and nurturing dog. Student dog reading has been a favorite event at the dog therapy visits in Middletown, but most important has been the effect the dogs have had on the students.

Kristyn Corace, teacher of the Multiple Disabilities Program at Thorne Middle School explains, "It is such an exciting day when the Therapy Dogs come to my multiple disabilities class! My students are extremely attentive to the dogs and the dog owners. Some of my students have difficulty staying on task and listening to directions. Not when the Therapy Dogs are here! My students are so engaged and motivated to participate that they work very hard to follow all directions! I have seen two students in particular really come out of their shell when the dogs are here."

Grace Pedretti of Lincroft has accompanied every dog therapy visit. Grace had her beloved golden retriever, Nikki, certified several years before the dog took ill and eventually died. She visited nursing homes and the special education classes at New Monmouth. Her own daughter, Valerie, is a student in Kristyn Corace's class. When IMPACT, the parent group representing autistic students in Middletown, asked Grace to explore the option of bringing Therapy Dogs to Middletown's classrooms, she contacted TDI to find certified dogs in the Middletown area. Grace Pedretti now coordinates all

visits to special education classes in seven Middletown school, Harmony, Bayview, New Monmouth, Village, Thorne, Bayshore, and Middletown High School South.

Grace recalls one of the more dramatic visits which took place at New Monmouth School. There, one boy was known to frenetically move about and continually throw things. However, he immediately calmed down when introduced to the dog. When the dog moved away, his behavior resumed.

Grace elaborated, "I asked if we could bring the dog back to the boy and he immediately calmed down again. I thought that is just what we are doing this for."

The TDI website relates that the relationship between man and dog can be traced back to our earliest history with dogs working to service people as animal herders, hunters, retrievers, search and rescue among other jobs. In recent years, they have been acclaimed for their amazing ability to aid people with disabilities, providing an invaluable measure of independence to their lives. But what has been recently explored in this long beneficial relationship is how a dog can also assist in improving the emotional health of human beings. Studies document cases where blood pressure is actually reduced by releasing stress and tension. Therapy Dogs are often utilized to visit the ill in hospitals, the elderly in nursing homes and children in schools.

The students in Kim Kiernan and Nikki Trezza's High School South classes prepared for Nanook's visit by researching the breed. They also followed his blog every day and learned about Nanook's life including that his younger brother, Pucca, is currently undergoing the TDI certification process. They asked questions and created welcoming cards for the dog. When the big day finally arrived, one young man was being particularly shy about approaching Nanook. Not wanting her classmate to miss out on this wonderful opportunity, one of the girls pulled him by the hand and introduced him to Nanook. Vanessa Mulhearn explained the ABC's of first meeting a dog including, Ask first, reach toward the dog with the **B**ack of your hand and pet them on the **C**hest rather than their head.

Nikki Shaw recalls the lingering effect of the Therapy Dog's visit to her students, "We wrote Nanook thank you cards and Vanessa (his owner) posted pictures of Nanook opening and reading them. Their faces and reactions were priceless when we logged on and saw that! One student always states sayings (ex: Excellent as an Elephant) he changed one of his sayings to "Nice as Nanook."

In view of the success of this year's pilot program, Grace Pedretti would like to coordinate routine monthly visits to the classrooms next year. Therapy Dogs would therefore be incorporated into the special education program as a curricular activity.

Superintendent Karen Bilbao is very supportive of the program and appreciative of the volunteer time given to the school by Mrs. Pedretti and the dog handlers.

She particularly sees the great value of the program to the special education students, explaining, "As a former Speech and Language Specialist and Special Education Teacher, I know that it is critical to use a variety of methods to elicit communication from students with special needs. The Therapy Dogs provide a very special medium for communication and relatedness. Some of our students who have not communicated through other means are responding to the Therapy Dogs. Others just love the dogs and are responding more than they ever have before."

TDI is a nonprofit organization established for the regulation, testing and registration of Therapy to Dogs to provide enjoyment, comfort and companionship to people in institutions such as hospitals, nursing homes, school libraries and other facilities. Visits by certified volunteer teams are free of charge. Currently TDI is supported by over 19,000 dog/handler teams throughout the US, Canada and other countries. You can apply to become a Therapy Dog handler, locate a Therapy Dog team in your area for appropriate Therapy Dog visitation or learn more about the value of Therapy Dogs by visiting their website at www.tdi-dog.org.

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Pictures on next page



(left) Vincent Argiro in Kristyn Corace's Multiple Disabilities Program at Thorne Middle School goes nose to nose with Autumn during his Therapy Dog Visit.

(right) Kevin Borngesser seems to put Nanook to sleep as he continually pets him and intently reads him the story of *Bad Dog*

Marley. Kevin is a student in a Bayshore Middle School special education classroom in the Middletown School district.



Cotton, a standard poodle and certified Therapy Dog gives Mrs. Hibell's students her full attention as they read to her at Bayview Elementary School in Middletown Township.

