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# Dogs provide daily serotonin for Cortland high schoolers

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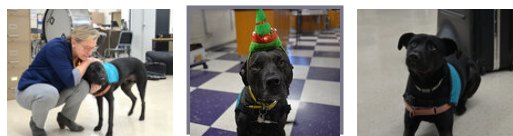


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**Therapy dog Coco dresses up for the holidays at Cortland High School.**

LILY BYRNE/ STAFF REPORTER

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Posted Tuesday, December 19, 2023 7:00 pm

**By LILY BYRNE/Staff Reporter**

In 2019, Westley, a black lab, was guiding the CEO of Guiding Eyes for the Blind through the New York City Marathon. Now he spends his time guiding Cortland High School students to an emotionally healthier state.

Thane Doubet, a biology teacher at Cortland High School, brings in his two therapy dogs, Westley and Coco, to school on a rotation. Whichever dog gets left at home each morning pouts, he said.

“It’s become one of those things that the kids just expect,” Doubet said. “There’s certain kids where some of them need it more than others, and I think it makes their day a little better.”

Doubet and his wife have raised six guide dogs for Guiding Eyes for the Blind, the first of which was Westley, who they adopted after his retirement. Westley made an appearance in Google’s 2019 Year in Review commercial.

“When he came back to us, he still wanted to do stuff, so we got him involved with therapy,” Doubet said. He had brought in some of his guide dogs in-training to school before, which made school administrators look into a policy on dogs.

“We have a board policy that articulates our belief in the benefits of therapy dogs to support our students,” said Superintendent Bob Edwards. “That policy was in place prior to me getting here, and I am grateful for whoever had the foresight to make this a possibility.”

Three dogs hang out full-time at the high school through Paws for Friendship, Inc., a nonprofit therapy pet organization that certifies animals to provide emotional support at schools, hospitals or nursing homes. The dogs get annual yearbook photos taken.

Coco, a rescue dog, could not make it from the office to Doubet’s room without being stopped by students for petting. Coco knows where each desk in the building is that has treats, and which humans will give them to him, Doubet said.

“I love Coco,” said Valerosa Gambitta, a senior. “He always comes over and gives us kisses. He’s so cute, and he’s just fun to have.”

The dogs are an asset to the school’s culture, said school social worker Jennifer Whelan.

“Having therapy dogs in our school buildings and classrooms brings joy and comfort to so many pet-loving students,” Whelan said. “Our therapy dogs, Coco, Westley and Tucker bring a sense of belonging to our students. They help our students feel more secure and confident, as well as improving their overall mental health and well-being.”

Tucker, a black lab, belongs to music department Chair Sharon Phetteplace, and is completely unbothered by the loud music the students play. He wandered the stage, going from student to student, during a full rehearsal of the holiday band concert.

“Just looking at a dog, touching a dog; just releases serotonin,” Phetteplace said. “If a kid is having a rough day, if they just come in and see Tucker and pet him on the head, they feel better. ... If he senses a kid with anxiety, he goes right up to them.”

“At the beginning of the school year, it was Tucker that allowed a girl who was very anxious about the first week of school, to finally speak her first words, just because of him,” Phetteplace said. “I got to talk to her about ‘Do you have a dog at home?’ and then she started talking. Tucker was able to bring

that out for that student.”

“It’s interesting,” Doubet said. “Dogs can sense things that we might not, so sometimes you’ll see the dog just go over and sit next to somebody or stand next to somebody, and you’re just like OK, I guess they might need that today.”

Phetteplace and her husband were never dog people, until their son started experiencing academic and emotional troubles, she said. Her son did some research, and found labradors tend to help with the problems he was dealing with.

“When we started to realize how amazing of a dog he was compared to other dogs, I was like, ‘How do I get him to come into work?’” Phetteplace said. “I mean, why not? The noise doesn’t rattle him, he’s super chill and he’s already helped a ton of kids.”

“Sometimes you just need to get away from the stress of the work, so you just pet the dog, and it’s really nice,” said Alexis Brown, a senior.

“I waste a lot of time just petting him, but the kids love him,” said Amit Rosenberg, a student teacher in the music department.

Dogs reduce stress levels in school-age students, Whelan said.

“Our therapy dogs are like magic for our students,” she said. “For a little while, they can bring happiness and calm to our students living in a world filled with incredible social and emotional stress and worry.”

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