

Listening To My Dog: Do What You Do Best

I am flattered that anyone would be interested in knowing Rugby's and my story. In this case, therapy work isn't something that usually gets noticed, except by the recipient, the dog and the handler. Truthfully, it's really just a story about doing what you do best. And, it's about teaching an "old dog" new tricks.

This journey began four years ago during my evaluation year as an elementary school teacher. I am fortunate to work in a district that keeps track of your credentials and makes recommendations to further your professional career. When I looked at the course offerings suggested for me (tree identification and orienteering), I laughed. I shared the list with my principal, who had quite the guffaw. Why someone would need these courses to teach reading was beyond the two of us. Since I am an "old" teacher (I have over 23 years of service to my county), there was little to offer me. My principal turned to me and asked, "What do you want to do to continue growing?" to which I replied, "Start a READER Dog program".

Knowing the current climate towards dogs in public places here in America, my first priority was to gain certification that would prove Rugby could be trusted in the school environment. Along with this certification came insurance that I felt was necessary to have in place to ease any concerns that the school system might have regarding having a dog in school. I took two classes and was evaluated by my local group, National Capital Therapy Dogs, Inc. and the Delta Society. That's when Rugby began going to school.



My original goal was to have a tutoring program where the 5th grade students meet with 1st grade students on a weekly basis to practice reading skills. Rugby circulates among the groups, listening to the reading and interacting with the students. I wanted to bring back passion and enjoyment when it came to reading. Research shows that, having a dog around while reading calms children who suffer from performance anxiety when asked to read. Little did I expect or know that it would boost the reading scores of both groups of children significantly. Not only that, but Rugby became a bit of a celebrity at school. He makes appearances on behalf of the PTA, visits specific teachers when he is in school (therapeutic in nature) and has fans who ask, “is Rugby here in school today?” on a daily basis. He visits second grade when they do their unit on service dogs (although he isn’t one). He is the contractual reward for students who have behavior issues and the guy on the side as our orthopedically challenged students practice their physical therapy (they “walk” the dog).

If this weren’t enough, Rugby and I also visit a respite center for physically and mentally challenged young adults twice a month. This is an important visit to me because my family receives respite care for my two nephews who are autistic. It’s my way of giving back to the community. Rugby pulls chairs, “walks the dog” and plays retrieve games with the clients. Oh, and he visits with the staff in between!

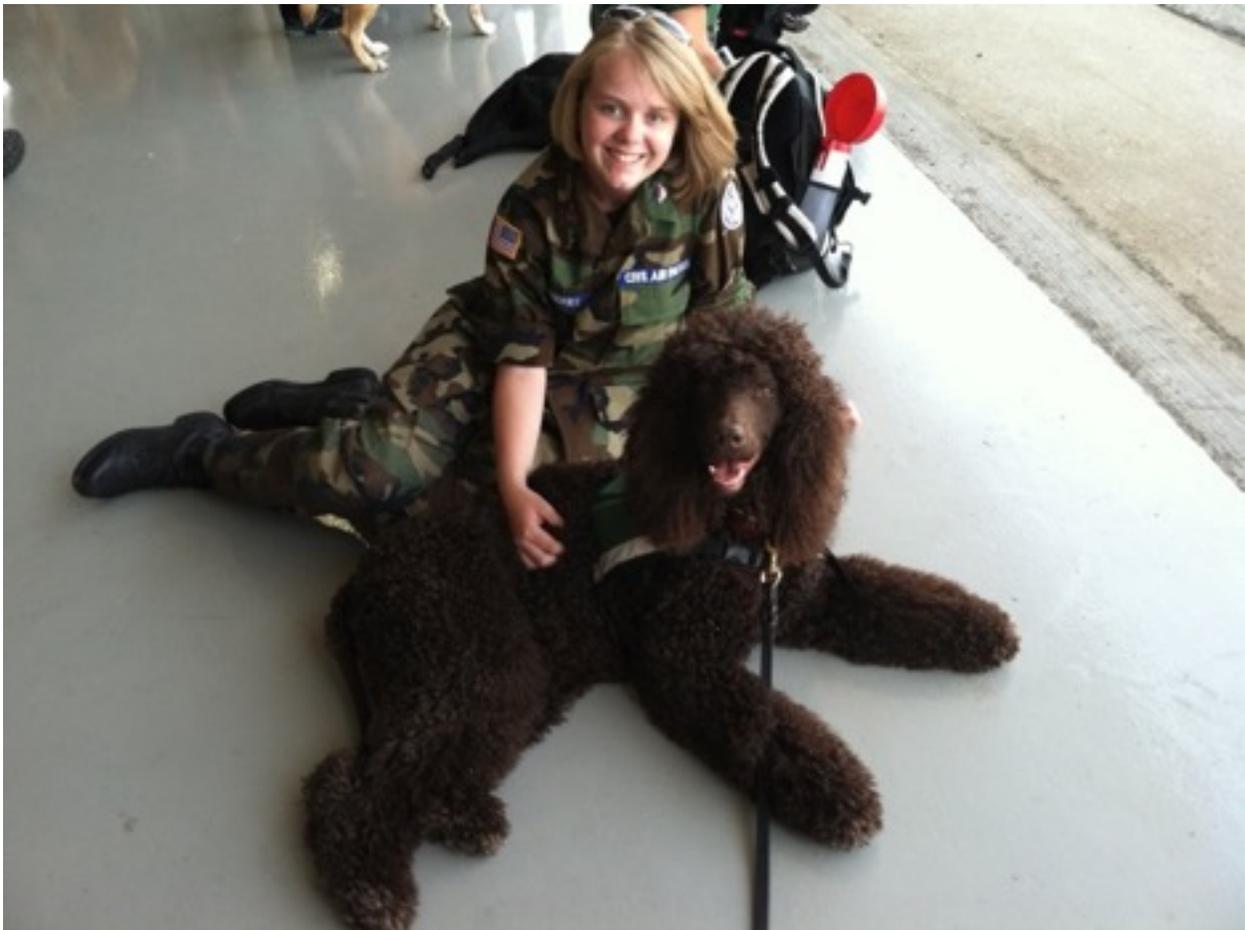


As a very young dog, Rugby showed immense talent for visiting with people. He turns his back toward them and sidles into a position where people can comfortably pet him. He never tires being petted and will choose to lean on people on occasions. He has an innate instinct for this work; I do not. This is what he does best. Doing this job with Rugby has taught me many things about counseling and empathy. He has brought to me a circle of friends who feel therapeutic animals provide an important social service.

In 2009, I was introduced to Yvonne Eaton, regional director for HOPE Animal Assisted Crisis Response. After speaking to her about how her group serves in crisis situations across the United States, I felt that this was the next step in Rugby's career. We attended a three hour screening that tested our responses to stress situations as well as our interactions with others. We passed! This garnered us an invitation to certify as an Animal Assisted Crisis Response team.



We traveled to Erie, PA for the opportunity to go through the airport security, board a plane, meet a firefighter in full gear and to be exposed to a large Hum V type fire engine, board and ride a coast guard cutter (that was an experience!), interact with the public at a local amusement park and take part in a simulated beach disaster on Lake Erie. We attended three days' of classes, learning the chain of command when in a disaster situation as well as role playing what we might say to someone who is in crisis as well as what to say to first responders. The most important things that I learned were to remember to always read your dog and respond to him first and foremost and that I cannot offer a solution to the situations in which we will be placed. The most that Rugby and I can offer is company in the midst of chaos. And, that we can and do well.



After being certified by HOPE AACR, we were fortunate to serve at the 9-11 Pentagon 10th Anniversary ceremonies. It was truly a privilege to hear the stories about our nation's heroes. Because I live in the Washington DC area, this assignment was particularly meaningful and had a personal air as well. We have also served on the beaches of NJ after Superstorm Sandy, and multiple times at the Navy Yard following the shootings

in building 197. Rugby and I attended many camps that involved children. Some were cancer survivors, some had parents deployed overseas, some differently abled. In all, we logged over 700 hours of service, earning the AKC Distinguished Therapy Dog medal.

Rugby is now retired and enjoying being my faithful companion. He continues to make guest appearances from time to time. Our journey has certainly broadened my horizons and taught me that nothing is permanent, sure or continuous. You must do what you do best and enjoy the day.