

Character lessons go to the dogs

Animal lover and cast of canines visit schools to 'train' students to do the right thing.

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Pauli Reading brings a unique cast of characters to character education.

Last week it was Stonewall, a 200-pound Newfoundland who lumbered through the halls of Selwyn Elementary, eyes rimmed in red and slobber dripping from his jowls.

Children maybe a quarter his size called his name and reached to pet him. He's a school celebrity since starring at an assembly, parading across the stage while third-graders sang "Who Let the Dogs Out?"

Now he was there to help Reading talk about honesty. It seems Stonewall, like the kids, occasionally makes mistakes. Reading showed them a book he had chewed. She talked about the time he raided the kitchen trash - but displayed good character by bringing back the bone he swiped.

"Are mistakes bad? No! Mistakes are how we learn things," Reading said. "But when you tell a lie, it's double trouble."

Reading, an animal lover from childhood, began her canine crusade eight years ago, when daughter Ali was a third-grader at Selwyn. Some troublemakers were disrupting classes. Reading, a flight attendant and school volunteer, had an idea: Maybe children could learn to train themselves the way she trained Murphy, her golden retriever.

She worked up a story about the dog, and urged the kids to "train your brain." Keep saying "No!" when you're about to do something wrong, she said, and eventually doing right will be second nature.

Soon after, Murphy was joined by Biskit, a West Highland terrier. Reading bought outfits to dress him as a Scottish bagpiper and a detective, transforming him into Sherlock McBiskit. After Murphy died, Daisy, an Old English sheepdog who loves jumping on the trampoline, joined the family. Daisy dons a 1950s-style poodle skirt for school appearances.

By the time Ali moved up to Alexander Graham Middle (she's a junior at Myers Park High now), her mom and the dogs were fixtures at Selwyn. She started recruiting friends' dogs, building a "staff" of more than a dozen, with an array of costumes and stories. They've also taught at Huntingtowne Farms and Beverly Woods elementaries and the private Providence Day and Charlotte Country Day schools.

Reading has self-published a book about Sherlock McBiskit, telling about how he conquered such bad habits as chewing up Beanie Babies and teasing an older dog. Reading, who is studying alternative medicine now, has dubbed herself president of Sherlock McBiskit and Friends Co., with fees for appearances based on what schools can pay. Biskit is vice president.

Most schools offer character education, but Selwyn Principal Linda Mintz says the kids pay more attention when there's a dog involved.

Reading promised the children they could pet Stonewall after the lesson. Despite his gentle nature, some of the kindergarteners clearly thought it was a bit like petting a tiger. Many gingerly offered their hands for a sniff, tapped him with a finger and scooted back to their desks.

Reading and Stonewall also visited the special classes for children with autism. The dogs have been known to help bring children who don't communicate well out of their shell.

During that visit, Rylin Martin, 5, volunteered to help walk Stonewall. Timidly at first, but with growing confidence, he held the leash and walked up and down the hall.

When they returned to class, Rylin tried to hand the leash to a bashful classmate, then threw his arms around Stonewall's massive neck.



Thomas Simmons reaches to touch Stonewall's fluffy head at Selwyn Elementary. Pauli Reading has a cast of a dozen or so dogs she dresses up to take to schools for character education talks



Rylin Martin and Pauli Reading walk with Stonewall through the hall at Selwyn Elementary School on Tuesday.