

Reader's best friend

Beginners learn to read with help from LBI's 'Tail Waggin' Tutor'

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Who knew that the tools for scholastic success could be as simple as four paws, a bandana and a big, wet nose?

Curling up with a book and a furry friend has never been so much fun — or so educational — since Taffy became LBI's newest celebrity and enthusiastic audience for beginning and struggling readers at a host of area libraries. Known as the "Tail Waggin' Tutor," 3-year-old Taffy is a regular in the children's book room at Ocean County Library's Barnegat branch and five other area libraries each month, where she is the welcome four-legged fan of youngsters who want to practice their reading skills, make up their own stories, or just enjoy her company.

The Tail Waggin' Tutor program was launched at Barnegat Library in 2008 when Lisa Taylor, the branch's senior librarian for youth services, saw the program operating successfully in other libraries and thought it might help make reading more fun for beginners at her location.

"When kids are reading at school or at home, they're often corrected or forced to perform at a certain level, and maybe that's why some kids don't like to read," Taylor said. "Taffy came on board a year into the program and helps create a fun, relaxed and nonjudgmental atmosphere for kids to read in."

Taffy's owner, retired teacher/librarian and Forked River resident Linda Bogden-Sharpe, knew Taffy would be perfect as a reading therapy dog when she adopted the adult Brittany from the Humane Society in her town.

"She was so loving and loyal and such a good listener, just a big mush," Bogden-Sharpe said.

Following training at Kindred Souls Canine Center in Howell and The Bright & Beautiful Therapy

Dogs Inc. in Morris Plains, Taffy received her certification as a therapy dog in 2009. In addition to schools, carnivals and the Barnegat library, Taffy makes regular monthly appearances at libraries in Toms River, Lacey, Berkeley, Beachwood and Waretown to meet and greet local residents and help kids throughout the area develop a love of reading.

Among Taffy's fans are Barnegat residents Philip Grafje, 7, and his mother, Susan, 35.

After reading a Pokemon book to Taffy at the Barnegat library, Philip shared his favorite things about his new canine friend.

"Her ears are very soft, and she has nice spots," he said.

While Taffy listens happily as young readers perfect their skills, Bogden-Sharpe believes that Taffy has benefited from the experience, too.

"The kids have really helped to socialize her, and she's developed greater confidence from being around them," Bogden-Sharpe said. Librarian Taylor is among the first to rave about the special spaniel.

"Taffy is just a pleasure to sit with; she's so calm and well-groomed. Kids love her, and parents always come over and pet her, too, so everybody gets something out of it," she said. "Overall, the program is a nice, relaxing activity for a Friday afternoon, and it doesn't even matter what anyone reads to Taffy — it's just about making reading fun for kids."

For more information on the Tail Waggin' Tutor program at Barnegat library or to sign up to read to Taffy from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. on the last Friday of each month, call Barnegat library at 609-698-3331.

The program is free and limited to the first six registrants.

You also can visit <http://theoceancountylibrary.org/Branches/BGT/bgt.htm>. The library is at 112 Burr St.

Taffy's next visit to the Barnegat library is March 25.



Linda Bogden-Sharpe (top) of the Forked River section of Lacey brings her therapy dog, Taffy (top and above), to the Barnegat branch of the Ocean County Library. Children practice their skills by reading to Taffy. (STAFF PHOTOS: TIM MCCARTHY)



Philip Grafje, 7, of Barnegat reads to Taffy and plays with her as his mother, Susan, watches.