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Georgia Library Spotlight - CAREing Paws

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GLA SPOTLIGHT

CAREing Paws

The mission of CAREing Paws, Inc. is to enrich the lives of others by embracing the power of the human-animal bond. One of the ways this is accomplished is by improving the literacy skills of children with animals assisting as reading companions.

CAREing Paws began operations in Georgia in 2012 with nationally registered therapy dog teams and Reading Education Assistance Dog (R.E.A.D.) teams located in middle and north Georgia, metro Atlanta, and surrounding counties. The organization has grown to include therapy and R.E.A.D.ing dog teams in Alabama and Texas and currently has over 110 volunteers in all three states.

CAREing Paws utilizes nationally registered therapy dog teams as literacy mentors in a school, library, or bookstore setting.

In the school system, these therapy dogs and their handlers work individually with children who test below their peers in reading skills, often have low self-esteem, and view reading as a chore. Children find reading to an animal less intimidating, a special time that is both helpful and fun, and a positive environment in which learning is facilitated.

In the library, the goal of the program is to reach as many children as possible to help them develop a love of reading and to have fun! The program is open to all readers—those who need specialized help and those who do not.

Reading programs are ongoing throughout the year. During the school year, the focus is on working with children in schools. Additionally, after-school reading programs are offered in local libraries, often located across from many



of the elementary schools. On Saturday mornings year-round reading programs are offered at local libraries.

Animals are ideal reading companions because they:

- Help increase relaxation and lower blood pressure
- Listen attentively
- Do not judge, laugh, or criticize
- Allow children to proceed at their own pace
- Are less intimidating than their peers.

Children improve their reading skills in a unique, fun, and safe environment. When a dog is listening, the environment is transformed, a child's dread is replaced by eager anticipation, and learning occurs. The handler is a skilled facilitator too—shifting performance pressure off the child and providing support, while the child gets supervised reading practice necessary to build vocabulary, increased understanding of the material, and gains fluency as a reader.

Among the libraries visited are Tyrone, Peachtree City, LaGrange, Dawson County,

Smyrna Public, Fayette County, and Milton Library (Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System). Teams visit once or twice a month with children reading to the dogs for 15 minutes on a pre-registered schedule.

Schools that CAREing Paws visits include: Chestatee Elementary School (Gainesville), Crabapple Lane (Peachtree City), and Silver City Elementary (Cumming).

In addition to reading visits, teams also visit travelers and passengers at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. Several times a year, teams visit college libraries including Georgia Tech, University of North Georgia, and Georgia Highlands to provide stress relief for students during finals.

For more information, visit <http://www.careingpaws.org/>.