



Primrose students Daniel, Olivia, Amber, Heaven, Tristan, and Emma love reading to Tender Loving K-9, Godiva



Missy is a trained R.E.A.D. program dog

Heartwarming Therapy Dogs

Tender Loving K-9's of Katy are making an impact on students and hospital patients

Written by Kimberly P. Taylor | Select photography by Sara Isola

When Sharon Evans retired from the Houston Police Department's homicide division in 2005 after 31 years as a homicide detective, she knew she wanted to continue to serve, but she wasn't sure exactly how or in what capacity. "Serving my local community has always been at the heart of who I am," says Evans. "I knew it wasn't in me to just retire and sit at home, so I began looking for opportunities where I could continue to make a difference close to home."

After some initial research into pet therapy, Evans was inspired to start Tender Loving K-9's in 2007, a 501(c)3 volunteer, not-for-profit organization whose purpose is to bring joy to individuals while visiting hospitals, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, public libraries, and schools in Katy, Houston, and the surrounding areas. "Rover Oaks Pet Resort on Kingsland Blvd. was really instrumental in helping me as I began training my dog, Gracie, and

growing the organization,” says Evans. “To them, I am forever grateful.”

P.A.W.S. About Town

The P.A.W.S. program at TLK-9’s (purpose, acceptance, warmth, and smiles) is focused on patient interaction and currently extends weekly visits on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and some Saturdays at Memorial Hermann Katy Hospital and on Wednesdays at Memorial Hermann Memorial City Medical Center.

“We visit every area of the hospital with the exception of pediatrics and the ICU,” says Evans. “At Memorial Hermann Memorial City, we start at the top of the North Tower and just work our way down. It’s really great to be able to see the joy and smiles our teams bring to patients, nursing staff, and family members who are there visiting loved ones.” In addition to hospital visits, TLK-9’s teams spend time visiting residents at Grace Care Center in Katy. “We’re starting to have a greater presence there, and the residents really appreciate being able to spend time with our dogs, as you can imagine. It’s highly rewarding,” says Evans.

Today, TLK-9’s has 55 members, all of whom are nationally registered members of Therapy Dogs Inc. and who have gone through specific testing to ensure both the handler and the dog are a good match for the program. “Therapy Dogs Inc. provides the skills test, support, and insurance for our members. They set the highest standards for therapy dogs,” says Evans. “We couldn’t do what we do without them.”

Dogs That R.E.A.D.

“One of the most exciting things TLK-9’s is currently working on is expanding our R.E.A.D. program, which stands for reading education assistance dogs,” explains Evans. “We’ve had the opportunity to work with several private schools in the Katy and Richmond areas, and we’d love the opportunity to expand into additional Katy ISD schools as well.”

Students, who are having reading difficulties are identified by teachers, school counselors, and principals, and with the permission of their parents, are selected to spend time in the library with TLK-9’s R.E.A.D. dogs and handlers.

Students sit on the floor and interact with the dog, and spend time reading to them and petting them. Handlers of the R.E.A.D. program go through additional testing and training so that their interaction with students is appropriate. “We don’t get into specific conversations about a student’s home life or emotional issues,” says Evans. “But if issues come up, our members - many of whom are retired teachers themselves - have been trained to appropriately get the student back on track and focused on their reading skills. The schools that have been participating in our R.E.A.D. program have begun tracking the progress of students and are reporting marked improvement.”



Denise Perkins, R.E.A.D. program coordinator for TLK-9’s and her dog Missy, work with Addison at a Katy library

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- Sharon Evans, Tender Loving K-9’s founder



Luke and his owner Kathryn became a certified therapy team in 2008 and began working at nursing homes and Memorial Hermann Katy Hospital



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How to Join

Becoming a therapy dog:

- Any breed or mix*
- Able to listen to their handlers*
- Able to pass tests and observation*
- Calm for petting*
- Able to walk on leash without pulling*
- Good around other dogs*
- Friendly to others, even strangers*
- One year of age or older*

Becoming a Volunteer

"We couldn't do what we do without our wonderful volunteers and their pets, and we'd love to see our membership grow so that we can have an even greater impact on our local community," says Evans. "We accept all breeds and dogs of all shapes and sizes. If you think your dog has what it takes to be a TLK-9's volunteer, we'd love to hear from you." KM

KIMBERLY P. TAYLOR is a freelance writer and is considering enrolling her schnauzer, Chester, in the TLK-9's program if she can get him to stop that leash pulling thing he does.

Find out how you can help
Visit tlk9.org or email sharon@tlk9.org

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