

Benny, a cancer-surviving dog, finds new career as award-winning therapy dog

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Benny looked anxious only for a moment, when an eager youngster started poking in his ear.

The mild-mannered Rottweiler cast a worried eye at his mom, Kelly Skiptunas, who raised a reassuring hand. Benny grinned, big tongue lolling, and he allowed the boy's exploration to continue without protest.

Benny is 114 pounds of lovable canine, with big brown eyes and a placid demeanor. He's a champion show and work dog, too, but his days of competition are behind him.

Forced into retirement by a bout of cancer and a long-running cycle of surgeries, Benny — aka Benelli, aka Am/Can Ch Oakview's Roughrider v Esmond — has found a new career as an award-winning therapy dog.

He was out doing his job Thursday afternoon at Columbia Public Library, which Benny visits once or twice each month as a Reading Education Assistance Dog for students from Gail Troutman's fifth- and sixth-grade Intermediate Unit 13 class at Park Elementary School.

Benny also visits hospitals and nursing homes, where his patience with people starved for a little canine affection has made him a popular guest.

"He used to come with me to visit my dad when he was in hospice," said Skiptunas, who raises and shows Rottweilers with her husband in Wrightsville.

"He was so good with the patients, everyone wanted to meet him."

When cancer ended his show career at age 3, she said, he started getting restless and bored at home — and so a new vocation was born.

Earlier this month, the American Kennel Club recognized Benny with an Award for Canine Excellence in Therapy.

It was, Anthony Skiptunas said, the first time a Rottweiler earned the prize — and it helps dispel the myth that Rotties are a vicious breed.

"Rotties get a bad rap," he said. "But Benny is just the biggest, gentlest soul."

During Thursday's visit to the library, Benny mostly sat quietly, his eyes wide and happy, his panting sometimes louder than the voice of the child reading.

The other children were listening to the story — but their hands were always moving, patting Benny's head or scratching his back. Occasionally, a child was rewarded with a quick lick from Benny's massive tongue.

"I know Benny is a big fan of Dr. Seuss," library director Lisa Greybill said as she pulled out another book for the children to read. "A very big fan."

Children who have a hard time reading in front of others are relaxed and happy to read with Benny, she said.

"The dog is not critical of mistakes," Greybill explained. "He's very patient. He doesn't mind if you read slowly ... or too quickly. He doesn't mind if you mispronounce a word."

"It gives the students confidence in their reading," Troutman added. "Benny never judges them."

A visit from Benny is something the kids anticipate, she said — "They practice their reading just to be better for Benny."

Benny also helps socialize the IU students, Troutman said. She pointed out a student stroking the dog's glossy fur and said the boy was petrified of dogs when he entered the program.

Columbia isn't alone in using a dog in reading therapy programs, Greybill noted. Most Lancaster County libraries participate in some form of dog-assisted therapy, she said.

Greybill said kids love reading to Benny — and the pooch seems to enjoy the experience, too.

"He tilts his head like he's listening," she said.

"He's very attentive to the children," Kelly Skiptunas agreed. "He loves kids."

Benny will turn 10 next month, she said, and will celebrate his birthday at the library.

"We come here as much as possible," she said, noting they also pay regular visits to a library in York County, as well as York Memorial Hospital and Lutheran Social Services.

"It's amazing," Skiptunas added, "how much better they read with a dog next to them."

The family has been raising and showing Rottweilers for 25 years, he said. Currently, Benny is the eldest of a four-canine clan — more than 500 pounds of active doggy muscle.

"All of our dogs are champions," Skiptunas said proudly. One — Benny's 7-year-old brother, Spencer, is an AKC grand champion — and he's also training to be a therapy dog like his big bro.

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