



No Payment Is Ever Enough

I am honored to share with NCA members my recent therapy dog interview with Northland Newfoundland Club and NCA member Ralph Holzhauer. Ralph has owned Newfoundlands for over 25 years and started therapy work with his first dog Elijah in 1999. Here he shares his experiences with two of his Newfs, Rowdy & Elton.

Rowdy and Elton have visited many places including nursing homes such as Essex Center and The Neighborhood House, school settings and various book signings. For 10 years, Rowdy ran to Ralph's jeep every day to go to school. At present, Elton has been going to Keene Valley's Neighborhood House since he was 10 weeks old.

When asked if there was one situation that really sticks out with how his dog responded to an individual, Ralph fondly shared that from October 2004 through June 2014, Our Rowdy, BearsCamp's Friend attended Elizabethtown-Lewis Central School every day, all day. By far the most unfortunate school mistake over that ten-year period involved not keeping a daily journal of Rowdy's activities. Each day presented innumerable memories, which is why finding just one causes a problem. As such, an incident on his last regular school day may demonstrate best what he rendered for the district on a daily basis.

Rowdy's 1,800 days of service entailed a schedule all his own. ELCS at that time contained all thirteen grades in one building with a population of about three hundred students. While Ralph taught high school math, Rowdy managed a reading program at a front corner of the classroom. While Ralph handled lessons of Algebra and Trigonometry, Rowdy listened to Clifford the Big Red Dog and the Cat in the Hat. After reading, the primary students returned to their rooms to write poetry and "Rowdy Journals" among other data-based curriculum. During their 'free' periods, Ralph and Rowdy left the confines of their room. In other environs, he participated in weekly aspects of art, P.E.,





Home Economics, as well, as several days a week of organized activities with all levels of Special Needs Children Curriculum. During his final eight years, the school superintendent located the Special Needs area purposely opposite Rowdy's room so he could have the freedom to cross over if a situation required his calming influence. Over the years collected data documented Rowdy's highly positive therapy effects on curriculum results, yet the immeasurables proved most important to Ralph.

Ralph relates, "The situation I best recall came on our last official class day, June 17, a Tuesday. At the beginning of homeroom an entourage of adults, school officials, deputy, and county social workers arrived at my door. Our kindergarten's teaching assistant held toward the back of the pack holding the hand of a scared and bewildered little girl. In her faded pink sweatshirt and clean but well-worn denim overalls, the six-year-old possessed a pair of picture books seemingly half her height. A hand guided her to the pillows marking Rowdy's office, though her chin never left its position glued to her chest. As she sat down her reading 'teacher' found his new student, granting a welcoming nuzzle and slurp on the cheek. Before the uninitiated could react a giggle and upturned frown signaled all 'was good', allowing the adults to exit downstairs to their ponderous deliberations. Apparently, our resident therapist was deemed acceptable to baby-sit for thirty or so minutes.

With their departure I got down to the business of my lesson, confident Rowdy would do what he had done literally thousands, if not tens of thousands of times. At the bell, my first period group exited and an eleventh-grade troop of trigonometry students entered advising me to check out the activity within the reading nook. Look I did, only to observe around the alcove's corner an interesting scene. In a semi-circle curl, Rowdy cradled his nestled reader still clinging to her colorful text, the narrator and listener fast asleep. Using mime that would rightly scare most Vaudeville audiences of old away, the lesson on Law of Cosine went surprisingly well, ending with a silent exit and time taken to educate the next class on the essence of quiet required within.

The next two classes proceeded with equivalent responses, leading to my lunch duty and a quandary. Fortunately, the adults reappeared before a choice forced my hand some two and a half hours later. This time a young woman accompanied the assemblage. Her long dark hair shaking, she covered her face with her hands holding back tears upon viewing the scene, her tiny daughter encircled by the wall of flowing black and white fur both in blissful sleep. Rowdy raised his head as the adults entered but did not rouse the child until the previously absent mother bent to levitate her daughter into her embrace. A tiny yellow rainboot slipped off, striking Rowdy's mid-section. When the mom reached to retrieve it, the furry therapist gave her hand a welcoming



wash and vote of confidence. Attempting a grateful smile, she quietly thanked me and after a prolonged glance at her child's benefactor, stammered an emotional, "Thank-you."

Down the hallway, the group withdrew, what happened to the tiny reader remains a mystery to me still. The family to my knowledge never resided in our district and I formally retired at the end of that month. Three weeks later my dear therapy dog friend passed, victim of a massive tumor blocking his esophagus, Rowdy's last day as typical as all the rest of his other 1,799.

When asked what made him want to go into therapy work with his dog Ralph replied "It seemed a great way to repay for the wonderful gift I've been given of a Newfoundland puppy, although do believe no payment could ever be enough."

Charlene Freiburger, Chair
NCA Membership Engagement & Retention Committee