

‘Comfort Dogs’ Welcome Students, Staff Back to Newtown School

As the children of Sandy Hook Elementary School returned to class on Thursday for the first time since last month’s deadly shooting spree, they and their parents were greeted by police escorts, support counselors, teachers—and a team of four-legged pastors called “comfort dogs.”

With the memory of the Dec. 14 massacre that killed 20 children and six staff still raw, it was a tense scene with a heavy police presence, but Lutheran Church Charities’ (LCC) seven golden retrievers brought a healing presence, said LCC President Tim Hetzner.

“We were told that some of the students didn’t want to come to school, but when they heard the comfort dogs would be there, they came,” he said. “Some teachers also said they needed the dogs, to be able to face the students.”

Like any time the K-9 Parish Comfort Dogs visit, children petted and stroked the dogs’ fur, gave them kisses and hugs—and talked to them. “One girl was sharing with the dog. She had a sibling who had died,” Hetzner said.

Sandy Hook Elementary School remains closed while Newtown decides what will happen to the building where gunman Adam Lanza opened fire before killing himself. Classroom equipment was moved to a shuttered middle school in nearby Monroe and the building redecorated to resemble the students’ old school.

Shortly after the massacre, LCC, a humanitarian organization based in Addison, Ill., and a partner of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, was asked by a local congregation to bring their golden retrievers to help Newtown heal.

The program began in 2008, Hetzner said, after LCC leaders noticed during Hurricane Katrina relief work how important pets were to victims of a disaster. "They are safe. They show unconditional love. And dogs have a unique ability to sense hurt in people," he said.

There are now about 60 comfort dogs living with various church families across six states. Members recently visited the Northeast after Hurricane Sandy, as well as tornado-ravaged Joplin, Mo., and a host of senior citizens' homes, schools and hospitals. LCC held its first convention last year for comfort dogs and their handlers, and they say demand for the program is increasing.

They are also part of a Christian ministry, with a mission to "bring the mercy, compassion, presence and proclamation of Jesus Christ to those who suffer." Moses, Chloe, Luther and their teammates wear blue vests when they are working and each has a business card that includes a Bible verse.

(Moses' is Exodus 34:6, which refers to a God who is "merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth.") On the Newtown trip, Isaiah the puppy, a comfort dog in training, was especially popular, Hetzner said.

The dogs don't proselytize, of course, but neither do the handlers when they are working, Hetzner said.

"We don't push Christianity on people. We are not necessarily offering to pray with people, but if someone wants to pray, we will," he said, adding that "our presence says an awful lot."

Handlers Jaci and Nathan Knuth brought 1-year-old Moses from Cairo, Neb., to Newtown after recently completing the six to nine months of training needed to develop an average golden retriever into a dog who doesn't bark, bite or lick and stays calm when confronted by an outpouring of hugs from strangers.

Jaci Knuth said accompanying Moses on his healing missions has

gotten her more involved in church and broadened her outlook.

“Faith is everywhere,” she said, “instead of just in our homes or churches.”

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