

Pets lend a helping paw at school

By Valentina Basilicata

For Hope, as for nearly 250 children attending **Crestview Elementary** in Laval, August 30 marked the start of a new academic year full of promise. Hope is still the new kid on the block, but her presence has already positively impacted students and staff. In a school where diversity is embraced, Hope fits right in even though she doesn't look, speak or act like a typical classmate. In fact, Hope isn't your typical classmate - Hope is a service dog.

In February 2018, Crestview became the first elementary school within the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board (SWLSB) to adopt a service dog and incorporate it into the classroom, according to Principal Aimee-Elizabeth Parsons.

"We [the staff] were looking at the rise of students who act out because of anxiety or lack of communication skills," she explains. "There was a clear need to help students regulate their emotions." With traditional methods already in place, staff decided to look outside the box for additional support.

Aside from regular-stream classes, Crestview runs several low-ratio special education classes and has seen a rise in students with various mental health issues.

Diana Antonacci, special education teacher, approached Parsons in October 2017 with the idea of working with Laval's ASISTA Foundation, which provides service dogs for communities dealing with mental health issues or special needs. "It's something that I really, really wanted for the school as a preventative strategy," says Antonacci, who played a key role in making "Project Hope" a reality.

John Angionicolaitis, spokesperson and co-founder of the ASISTA Foundation, explains, "The goal of the dog in the school is to provide a better quality of life at the school. These dogs are trained to tackle certain tasks, such as a crisis situation. At

the end of the day, yes it helps the students, but it also helps the staff. And it puts a smile on everyone's face."

Despite a hefty \$20,000 price tag, the school adopted Hope, a two-year-old



Crestview student bonds with Hope. (Photo, Diana Antonacci)

black Labrador. The money covers insurance and vaccinations, though most of it goes toward dog and handler instruction. A Crestview special education technician, Michelina Scala, volunteered to be Hope's foster mom.

"The government gives funds for different initiatives in the school, so that was our start up money," says Parsons. She also created a GoFundMe page (<https://ca.gofundme.com/HopeforCrestview>) for the remaining \$15,000. Parsons notes the school is \$5,000 shy of their goal. Donations are still welcome.

Hope and Scala are now officially part of Crestview's crisis intervention team, which aims to de-escalate situations when a student becomes aggressive. Hope soothes and encourages students.

"I had a young boy, a student who is non-verbal, who we could not motivate," Parsons recalls. "Now he will complete three tasks in the morning in order to just go pet the dog." Parsons adds, "Even for children who need to stim [self-stimulation] or make sounds, they seem to just be calm when the dog is there. It's been extraordinary." ❀

Brigitte Valois, **Lindsay Place High School's** vice principal, is affectionately known by students as "the VP with the dog." Valois and her family pooch Cricket, a seven-year-old Bernese-Rottweiler mix, work as an administrative duo to create a more serene and friendly environment within this Lester B. Pearson School Board school (LBPSB).

"If dogs are bringing calmness and peace to our homes, the benefits can only be extended when in a school setting," asserts Valois. "My experience with Cricket sends a strong message to the community that we care about our students' well-being just as much as we care about their grades."

As school resources diminish and student stress levels rise, Valois believes it's essential to explore effective and out-of-the-box ways to support today's teens.

Although Cricket is not officially a trained service dog, her good-natured, friendly disposition have a calming effect on the kids at Lindsay Place. Cricket visits students in the resource and planning rooms; calms nerves during stressful situations; and even helps special needs students work through anxiety or meltdowns, letting them pet her on her doggie bed or offering a weighted cuddle.

When roaming the halls, Cricket's presence is an icebreaker. Valois says students feel more comfortable shooting the breeze with her, "expediting the building of relationships."

"I have conversations with students who normally would avoid speaking with a vice principal. We get to know each other before issues arise," explains Valois. "It helps me be preventative because they'll let me know if something is bothering them before it becomes a big issue."

What started out as a six-month project while obtaining her Master's degree as vice principal at St. Thomas High School (LBPSB), has evolved into a transformative undertaking lasting more than two years...and counting. According to Valois' findings, her work with Cricket at St. Thomas led to an 80 percent drop in suspensions as well as a significant decrease



Lindsay Place student Brianna Imbeault Zinck shares a hug with Cricket. (Photo, Brigitte Valois)

in incidents of aggression and referrals to student services. It's not surprising that Cricket was welcome with open arms by administrators and the community when Valois began her new position at Lindsay Place this past summer.

"[Cricket] has a very positive impact on the environment of the school. She loves attention; she'll lie on her back and have [students] rub her belly. She gets a lot of laughs and smiles."

Valois and Cricket have inspired colleagues within the LBPSB; there are three other schools that have shown interest in canine companions.

Valois notes: "Kids connect to animals because they're not judgmental. They treat everyone equally; they don't notice differences. And I think that can be really powerful in schools."

Valentina Basilicata is a freelance journalist, special needs advocate and proud mom. Visit her website at www.vbwriting.com. ❀