

Del Mar school project goes to the dogs

Students helping community, walk pets for those who can't

By James Steinberg

STAFF WRITER

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DEL MAR – It's what you might call a win-win-win situation, as in the kids win, the dogs win and the dogs' owners win.

The dogs total six right now, but their number is expected to grow. They belong to Del Mar residents who aren't able to walk them every day and the half-dozen youngsters, all students at the private Winston School, who have been walking them three times a week since mid-October as their contribution to the community.

And as the number of dogs needing to be walked grows, so will the number of kids who will be there to walk them, said Mike Peterson, the headmaster of Winston School on Ninth Street.

The dog walking program is a cooperative effort between the school and Del Mar Community Connections, a group that provides educational and service programs for residents.

"This is a great service for people who find it difficult to walk their dogs themselves, especially the elderly. . . . As people age, they're not as able to exercise their dogs, but want to keep dogs in their lives," said Shirley King of Del Mar Community Connections.

King and Connections volunteer Chris Engelbrecht collect the dogs and deliver them to the school for their 40-minute walks, then return them to their homes.

"We're in the midst of trying to find more people who are unable to walk their dogs on a daily basis, and more people who will help deliver them to the school," Engelbrecht said yesterday.

With five lively, yipping and barking dogs in tow, King, Engelbrecht and Del Mar resident Chuck Newton, who brought his dog, Colleen, for a walk, attracted a small crowd of youngsters more than sufficient to walk a larger number of dogs, had they been available.

"They always get excited when they come here. I don't think it's the treats, I think it's you guys," King told the youngsters.

"I think it's me," said Sydney Johnson, 14, an eighth-grader from Carmel Valley.

Sydney, who has a cat, a dog and two guinea pigs at home, said she likes to walk neighbors' dogs when she has the chance. "It gives me something to do, and I like the exercise."

Desiree Seng, 13, an eighth-grader from La Jolla, said she likes dogs – she has one at home – and being able to help people. Her favorite dog, Sage, is also student Nate Gannon's favorite.

Nate, 16, lives in Vista. He has four dogs and five cats at home, and his mother is a dog groomer, he said.



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Sydney Johnson, 14, walked Charmie, a poodle, and Desiree Seng, 13, exercised Sage at Winston School in Del Mar yesterday. Students at the school volunteer to walk dogs as a community service.



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Dakota Carrel, 15, a student at Winston School, walked Colleen back to owner Chuck Newton, 89, of Del Mar. Students at the private school volunteer to walk dogs as a community service.

"I just like to help people," he said. "I guess you can say my favorite is Sage. That's the one I've been walking the most."

The other Winston School dog walkers are Dakota Carrel of Oceanside, and Corey Evans and Megan Hogan, both of San Diego. Their canine counterparts include Charmie, Lexus, Penny and Colleen.

Colleen belongs to Newton, 89, who mostly exercises her in the yard at home. Colleen likes to come to the Winston School for her walks because of all the attention people pay her, Newton said.

"She's a people dog," he said.

"The kids view this project as a club, not just work," King said. "I was taken with their term that this is a dog club. This gives them a chance to relate as group, and also with the adults who bring the dogs here."

To Peterson, the headmaster, the gratifying thing is not only that his students are doing something for others, but that they are doing it together as a group.

"It's really kind of neat to see that," he said.

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