

On the Positive Side: Diggity Dog Reading
by Jean Gilbert
October 28, 2011

Diggity Dog Reading is a literacy project just getting started this school year with emphasis on humane education, introduced recently in an elementary classroom here in Las Cruces. The project was conceived by the author of this article---Jean Gilbert, a retired elementary school teacher and humane educator with the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico.

The project is designed to provide additional reading time for children on animal topics, on a weekly basis during the school year. Many of the stories are award-winning books appropriate for young children, supplied by the humane educator and the school. The reading themes and stories, tied to character development and good citizenship, center on companion animals and pet care promoting humane treatment.

A long term objective of Diggity Dog Reading is to grow or expand the project, with recruitment of volunteers to include partners or teams in classrooms, clubs, and youth organizations in the community.

Some noteworthy books that will be used with the Diggity Dog Reading project this year are summarized below:

Rich Cat, Poor Cat by Bernard Waber was a featured story recently for introduction to the reading project. The story tells about life as a stray, the opposing worlds of a homeless alley cat named "Scat" versus privileged felines. Despite Scat's circumstances, it is a charming tale with comical contrasts in story characters. The "mustn't dos" for the housecat: "mustn't make faces at the canary" and "mustn't sleep in the linen closet". It is noted Scat could use some "mustn't dos", escaping injury running into traffic on a busy street. Predictably, Scat finds a home and a family. And the transformed feline with name "Gwendolyn", probably learns the "mustn't dos" of her new household.

Michael and the Cats is a stand-out for the warmth of prose in Barbara Abercrombie's writing and the eye-catching, luminous paintings by the illustrator Mark Graham. The central character, Michael is a pre-schooler. He has no pets, only a baby brother. He is excited to meet two cats in the home of relatives where the family is staying. As the story unfolds Michael learns through trial and error how to befriend the two felines he so badly wants to please.

Dog Breath, The Horrible Trouble With Hally Tosis is a clever and comical story written by Dav Pilkey. Hally is an irresistible, brown mutt with personality plus and a valued playmate for the family's children. She has one major problem: awful stinky breath! She knocks visitors off their feet with her smells and slobbery kisses. After Hally unseats the grandmother and spills her cup of tea, the parents conclude the dog's bad breath is intolerable and she must find a new home. The story elicits lively discussion about dog behavior, training and citizenship skills, and pets' needs including dental care. The story ends happily with Hally saving the day.

A Home for Dakota by author Jan Zita Grover tells a moving story of the rescue of a dog from a puppy mill. The dog is rescued by a foster person and later adopted to a family with a young girl recovering from a serious illness. It is an uplifting and empathy-provoking story, a must-read, conveying how children and companion animals can love and help each other.

Connecting children to literature and humane principles through stories about animals is rewarding and fun. Consider volunteering in the Diggity Dog Reading project and making a difference in the education of children while promoting kindness towards animals.

Jean Gilbert serves on the board of directors of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico. Interested contributors for "On The Positive Side" column can contact HSSNM at (575)523-8020.