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MY COMMUNITIES

Willie the Dog and pals lend kids an ear

 Video: [Early readers read aloud to dogs](#)

By [Eloise Aguiar](#)
Advertiser North Shore Writer

KAHUKU — Expectation and excitement filled the air outside the Kahuku Public & School Library before it opened Thursday as children waited to read to an audience that was all ears — dog ears.

Faces beamed and children trailed behind as a black labradoodle, a black labrador and a Welsh corgi made their way to a large conference room where they would be joined later by a blond labradoodle to hold court with the youngsters.

They came to see the dogs but didn't realize the benefits they provide.

Arlete Byrne, 33, knew — and that's why she brought her two young children for the past three years to the Read to Willie the Dog and Friends program sponsored by Hawaii Fi-Do, a nonprofit that trains service dogs. To them it's a day of fun and pleasure, Byrne said.

"One of the things I notice is it helps their confidence," Byrne said. "I can sense that with my children."

Susan Luehrs, who created Hawaii Fi-Do, and volunteers have been sharing their service and therapeutic dogs with children to help them with reading for five years. It began at Ka'a'awa Elementary School when eight special-needs children



Juju Emerson, 2, reaches for Kia, a black Labrador, at the Kahuku Public & School Library. He's sitting with his mom, Fia Emerson, and brother, Nalu Emerson, 6; at right is Susan Luehrs of Hawaii Fi-Do, a nonprofit that trains service dogs.

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demonstrated that a canine can be more than a best friend.

It can help improve reading ability, said Luehrs, who retired as a special education teacher from Kahuku High & Intermediate School this year.

Since then, students have been reading to Willie and his friends in schools, libraries, homeless shelters and abuse shelters. The animals are certified and some will be placed in private service, including the black labradoodle, Suki, who is being trained to detect seizures. Practicing with the young readers is helping Suki to be calm, Luehrs said.

"It's hard to say how many kids we touch with the read program, I am sure it is in the thousands by now," she said. "The therapeutic activities are up there, too."

The dogs listened attentively to the children at the library and provided a nonjudgmental ear. No one corrects the children or helps them unless they ask, Luehrs said, who recognized a long time ago the therapeutic aspects of dogs. Often children will pet the dogs while reading and that calms the children, she said.

Marc Duke, 11, of Punalu'u, didn't know what to expect when he signed up for the session but he said it was a good experience with Suki.

"It's weird and different," Marc said. "Reading to a dog is unusual."

Elizabeth Dacuycuy, 8, and a Kahuku Elementary School student, said Willie reminded her of her own dog that had died.

"It was a cool and different experience," Elizabeth said, "It was really nice to be reading to dogs."

Her grandmother Carol Ueda thought the experience might be unique.

"It was new for us and a great way to expand the kids' imaginations and repertoire," Ueda said.

READ TO WILLIE THE DOG AND FRIENDS

Kahuku Public & School Library

9-10 a.m. June 21 and 28

Free, reservations required.

Call 293-8935

To donate to Hawaii Fi-Do

P.O. Box 757

Kahuku, HI 96731

Phone: 638-0200

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Next year, the reading program will include a preschool, the Schofield library and Mokapu Elementary School at Marine Corps Base Hawaii, Luehrs said.

At Mokapu, the group will be doing reading and therapy for the children, many of whom have parents in Iraq, she said.

The organization also has a vocational training program and visits various organization such as hospitals and care homes.

Created in 1999, the organization operates with an all-volunteer staff, including handlers, trainers, kennel personnel and groomers.

"People do this for love," Luehrs said.

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