

'He left footprints on many hearts'

Slugger, a service dog trained to help children in special needs classes in Halifax schools, loses his battle with cancer

By Duane Good, Editor



Slugger, pictured in March worked as a service dog in Halifax Area School District classrooms from late 2004 until Oct. 8, four days before his death from lymphoma. (file photo)

At last week's regional Special Olympics event at Halifax Area High School, students and staff were informed of the death of a close friend of many students in the Halifax district.

Slugger, a service dog used to help students in some of the learning support and autism support classes in the Halifax schools, died Oct. 12 of complications from lymphoma, a form of cancer.

A male boxer, Slugger worked with students until Oct. 8, four days before his death. He was raised by and resided at the home of Greg and Noelle Stewart, teachers in the Halifax school system.

Trained for service dog work by Lancaster-based New Life Assistance, Slugger had been part of the Halifax district since late 2004, working mainly at Halifax Area Middle School and at Halifax Area Elementary School.

In the autism support classes, he was used to help students learn independence, self-control and responsibility. He also raised the visibility of the autism students in the school setting, since the students and Slugger often were seen together.

As one teacher stated, "They became known as 'the cool kids with the dog.'"

In addition, guidance counselors used him to help students with other needs. He played with children at recess and, according to one teacher, "has helped a lot of loners to have a 'group' to play with."

Slugger was "friendly to everyone" and, "all the kids really like seeing him every day," a student said earlier this year.

In return, this special pooch made many friends of his own.

"He left foot prints on the hearts of the many lives that he touched," Noelle Stewart said. "He was always there to patiently listen, give a sloppy kiss, or receive a giant hug!"

Middle School Principal Gregory Milbrand noted that when the autism support classes moved to the middle school two years ago, "Slugger became an immediate part of our community and culture.

"He made great connections with kids and staff members alike," Milbrand noted. "We appreciated his fun-hearted, loving demeanor...he will be missed dearly. We graciously thank him for his service, affecting hundreds of students' lives."

Slugger began chemo-therapy treatments in February after being diagnosed with lymphoma, a cancer common in dogs but with remission possible in 50 to 75 percent of cases, according to the websites www.dogcancer.net and www.caninecancer.com

“When (Slugger) became ill, his impact on our community became apparent by the immediate outpouring to raise funds for our treatment, as well as many well wishes to Slugger and the Stewart family,” Milbrand said.

According to Noelle Stewart, almost \$2,700 was raised for Slugger's treatments and was extremely helpful. Chemotherapy treatments for dogs can be expensive, according to an article in the Sentinel's March 30 issue.

Funds were raised through a dance, donations from individuals and businesses, event days at the schools, and the sale of t-shirts with the words, “Slugger: Lending a Paw When It Matters Most.”

Individual students showed their love and concern for the sick pooch in different ways. According to the March 30 article, a fourth-grader donated her birthday money toward his treatment costs. A middle school student, with no prompting from anyone, gave a teacher a dollar. When Slugger lost weight during the chemo, a third grade student brought in dog biscuits for him. And two brothers set up a donation jar in their home, checked behind couch cushions for loose change, and asked family visitors for donations.

After Slugger's passing was announced at the Special Olympics by Halifax Superintendent Robert Hassinger, the audience showed its appreciation for his years of service with a round of applause.

Halifax students plan other tributes to their departed friend in the near future, according to one of the teachers.

Employees at the Tender Loving Care Kennels in Dauphin and Middletown plan to wear their “Lending a Paw” T-shirts Tuesday, Oct. 19 in Slugger's memory. The kennels used donation cans to collect donations toward Slugger's chemo treatments and held a fund-raiser, cutting dog nails and donating the proceeds toward the medical bills as well.