

A Comforter to Come

Local congregation in line to receive LCC K9 Comfort Dog

By Christine Reid | KT&FP Senior Editor

Despite the best efforts of his parents and professional counselors, the little boy remained mute in the weeks after a gunman shot up his classroom at Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 20 of his classmates.

That is, until a visit from a big, gentle golden retriever working as a comfort dog for the Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry, one of several comfort dogs deployed on the school campus in the weeks following the tragedy.

The boy only nodded when asked if he wanted to pet the dog, but then the petting was followed by a hug and then the little boy curled up with his head resting on the dog's chest.

A few minutes later, the little boy lifted one fluffy ear and began whispering his memories of all the horror he'd witnessed that day, a breaking dam that finally allowed him to begin to process a trauma that had been unspeakable up to that point.

That's the healing power of dogs that Emmanuel Lutheran Church wants to harness locally as the host church for only the second LCC K-9 Comfort dog in Oklahoma.

Church secretary Mickie Post first came in contact with Rufus, the ministry's other Oklahoma comfort dog (all are golden retrievers) at the home of her grandchildren's music instructor in Edmond, one of the dog's caretakers.

"I fell in love with the dog and the ministry right then and there and brought the dog to our church for a visit on Mother's Day," she said.

Hosting a comfort dog locally was a concept quickly embraced by the rest of the congregation, and the lengthy process of acquiring a dog was initiated in August.

Keith Leimbach of El Reno, an elder at the Kingfisher church, is spearheading the local effort, which involves a team of church members who eventually will be trained to care for and handle the dog, once it is assigned.

In the meantime, the church is raising the \$15,000 needed to pay for the dog and training for the team.

The church also will be responsible for the dog's ongoing care.

Each dog is trained for 18 months before it is dispatched to its host church, at which time the local team is trained to work with him or her. The Kingfisher dog will be coming from a Texas training facility.

"A comfort dog is not the same as a service dog that attaches to one person," Leimbach said. "These dogs are trained to have multiple handlers and all the handlers have to be trained to interact with the dog in the same way."



Mickie Post and Keith Leimbach pose with a stuffed replica of the dog they hope is headed here soon.

Part of the church's responsibility also will be to act as the dog's "manager." Each dog has a Facebook Page and Bible verse and business cards which contain that information are shared with everyone who spends time with the dog.

(In the aftermath of Sandy Hook, parents reported being able to gauge how their children were faring on any given day back at school by the number of comfort dog business cards they carried home in their pockets.)



TEN WHO CARE — The LCC Comfort K-9s currently assigned to the Southwest Region, which includes Texas and Oklahoma, pose for a photo.

"They get a Facebook Page on their first day of training and people can send them messages or post on their pages," Leimbach said. "They're really kind of celebrities."

The local church doesn't have a date yet when its dog will be ready and will only receive about 90 days advance notice, Leimbach said.

Once the dog is back and active in the community, he or she will be available to be deployed in all kinds of situations, not just circumstances of extreme trauma or disaster, he said.

The dog will be scheduled to "work" six days a week and then have one day off.

"We won't take the dog anywhere we haven't been invited, but we can go to nursing homes, schools, hospitals, crash scenes, all kinds of places where people could use some extra comfort," he said. "We can also go outside the state as we're needed."

Leimbach encourages anyone involved in a program where the dog's assistance might be needed to contact the church. The greater the local need, the sooner a dog might be assigned here, he said.

"Optimistically, we're hoping to have a dog by the end of the year or the first of next year," he said.

Anyone interested in donating to the project can do so directly to the church or by participating in several planned fundraisers.

The first is a smoked meat sale, with a deadline to order of noon, Monday, April 8, and pick up on April 13. Contact the church for more information.

Members of the comfort dog team include: Pastor Tim and Heather McCarty, Keith and Wendy Leimbach, Karin Leimbach, Mickie Post, J Juan and Denise Jech, Roger and Susan Post, Carl and Katie Schroeder, Ora and Sharon Yoder, Chuck and Lois Henderson, Michael and Liz Pendergraft, Robert Wolf and Gene Yost, the project veterinarian.