

K-9 Companions Called to East for Emotional Support; Students turn to dogs for comfort following a tough week

Grace Maloney | Editor-in-Chief

Throughout the past couple of weeks, East students may have noticed the increasing number of furry, four-legged companions roaming the halls. Following the recent tragic events, comfort dogs from Lutheran Christian Charities were called in to support East students during an emotional time.

St. Charles East's regular comfort dog Chloe, who comes to the school about once a month, is a part of Lutheran Church Charities' comfort dog program.

East staff members reached out to this organization following the losses of Tiffany and Brittany Coffland on Friday, Mar. 10. "There was a call made to LCC asking if we could bring some of the dogs because of the situation that you guys had. We as volunteer handlers are the first ones to go into those kinds of situations," says handler Ray Pomoller.

Ray Pomoller, with comfort dog Eunice, was one of many to respond to the call. The dogs and handlers came to the school during the day on that Monday and Tuesday as well as the St. Mark's vigil on Tuesday night. Many also returned to East on Friday Mar. 17 and Monday Mar. 21 following the loss of East junior Kody Dietrich.

"It was a typical situation that we've been in before,"



East junior Elaine Bolduc pets and plays with Eunice the comfort dog. Photo courtesy of Ray Pomoller

says Pomoller. "We have the dogs there and students will just kind of gather around and they'll pet the dogs and they'll talk, which is a very healthy thing for them. Whatever they're talking about, they're talking. Maybe it's about the situation at the school, but it could be anything."

Juniors John Klikas and Jake Miranda both spent time with the dogs. "They really did help. You were able to just get your mind off of things," says Miranda.

"Just the fact that they were so calm, and really cute, they really helped. That's what I enjoyed about them... I loved Bella. Eunice and Chloe were there, too," says Klikas.

Jan Bersano, another LCC comfort dog handler, says "For us, we do this because we feel like it's a part of our ministry and a part of our mission, but we take the dogs only by invitation. And we're there really just to provide that comfort that a dog can provide by just being something to pet and somebody to talk with, especially for young children. They'll chat with a dog."

The dogs go through unique training specifically for this comfort dog program. "We do all of our own training in Northbrook," says Pomoller, which is where LCC is headquartered. "Each dog usually receives between 15 to 18 months of training, and it usually comes out to be 2000 hours worth of training. They work with two trainers over that year or more period of time to learn how to be a comfort dog."

Golden Retrievers are the only breed that LCC trains. "Golden Retrievers as K-9 comfort dogs, they're in tune with people's feelings, they feel them, and that's why they comfort so well," says Debra Baran from Lutheran Church Charities.

"The dogs are trained to remain calm in any kind of event," says Bersano. "The training is so that they are not reactionary to things. They ex-



Lutheran Church Charities comfort dogs Eunice and Zippy are welcomed to St. Charles East High School. Photo courtesy of Kelly Brittan

pose them to a huge number of things so the dogs won't react to loud noises and stuff like that."

Pomoller says, "When we're sitting out in the hallway in school and we'd have a mass of students change classes, [the dogs] have to be able to work in those kinds of conditions and to have a bunch of people come up to them and pet them and for them not to get excited and to stay calm to just be there and provide comfort and let people pet them and scratch them and that's where our training differs."

"At the end of their training period, then most of the dogs will be assigned to a church, and the churches that want to be in the program put together a ministry program for the dogs," says Pomoller. "For instance, Zippy who came to St. Charles East is from St. Peter's Lutheran church in Arlington Heights... Whoever could respond to come out and be with the students."

Along with the dogs, LCC handlers also go through training to be able to work with any of the comfort dogs. "One of the unique things about these dogs is that they are trained to have multiple handlers," says Bersano. "So

it's very critical that all handlers learn the right commands... I have handled different comfort dogs, and they are consistent commands that are trained to all the LCC comfort dogs."

Though the comfort dogs have busy schedules, "They need time to relax and play," says Baran. Bersano says, "A comfort dog can work a maximum of six hours a day in three hour increments, so they're never vested longer than that." Bersano works with comfort dog Asher. "When he's vested, he knows he's working, but once the vest is off, he's pretty much like any other well-trained dog."

The dogs are well cared for at home as well. Each dog receives a fully body massage every night. "The benefit of the body massage is because he's had a stressful day, and the dog internalizes some of that stress... Literally, you're giving [Asher] a massage and within ten minutes, he's a limp rag. It's adorable... He just falls asleep."

There are currently over 120 LCC K-9 comfort dogs, placed and in training, and over 750 handlers in the LCC K-9 Ministry.

The dogs have responded to situations and emergencies all over the country. "On a national basis, the dogs responded to places like the Boston bombing, the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, tornadoes throughout the nation, fires, all kinds of things," says Bersano.

"Sandy Hook was in 2012, and my wife and I were there with the dogs," says Pomoller. "We went from about 20 dogs then in 2012 to now five years later with over 120 dogs in over 20 states," says Pomoller.

"But it's not all disasters or difficult events," says Pomoller. During Christmas season, the comfort dogs work with United Airlines to put on an event for very ill children.

"It's a simulated flight to the North Pole," says Pomoller. "They'll take off, maybe circle the airport and come back in to another gate. We have that gate all decorated as if it were the North Pole."

"LCC's overall mission is to bring the mercy compassion, presence and proclamation of Christ to people," says Bersano. "It's really a blessing to be able to do this ministry for people."

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