

# ELK RAPIDS NEWS

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Lakeland fifth graders welcome Maverick into their classroom. Photo by Barb Mosher

## Four legs and huge hearts

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Charlie was supposed to be a hunting dog, but gun shots spooked him, he didn't like the feel of a duck in his mouth, and he wasn't big on swimming. So, Charlie became a loveable house pet, a super easy-going dog even for a yellow lab. He was so relaxed that his owner, Mill Creek Elementary School third grade teacher Jane Bruso, thought he might make a good school therapy dog.

Maverick, on the other hand, was literally born to be a therapy dog. An area labradoodle breeder who was interested in seeing one of her pups in that role crossed paths with Lakeland Elementary School principal Angie Nichols. "I've always had a desire to have a therapy dog, so we joined forces," Nichols said. Maverick joined her family as a nine-week-old puppy, and training began immediately.

Both Charlie and Maverick are now certified therapy dogs, thriving at their respective schools, delighting students, parents, and staff with their affable nature and instinctual approach to their "work" of providing a comforting and calming presence, receiving and returning affection, and napping when there's nothing else to do.

"Maverick's just a very laid back, go-with-the-flow dog," Nichols said. "Actually, he's lazy, but in the best way. And he's so gentle."

Therapy dogs are different than service dogs, which are trained to perform tasks for people with physical disabilities. The training and certification process for therapy dogs is less intense, but does require them to demonstrate consistent and reliable obedience skills in various public settings amidst a variety of distractions.

Therapy dog certifiers need to see canine candidates remain calm and focused regardless of the environment, circumstances, and people or other animals present. The dogs must enjoy interacting with humans of all ages, including those who might be awkward, clumsy, or even rough in petting them. There can be no signs of aggression or resource guarding.

"It's so easy for him," Bruso said of eight-year-old Charlie. "He's the most mellow dog, very much a therapy personality."

The 85-pound pooch often starts the school day with Bruso at Mill Creek's front door, a furry island of calm welcome in the morning rush of incoming students. Then he settles into her classroom, at times meandering from desk to desk, stopping for a pat from any child who offers one, and treating himself to snack crumbs that have fallen to the carpet.

On Tuesdays and Fridays, Mill Creek teachers can reserve 15-minute blocks of time for individual students to hang out with the lab. Some love to take Charlie by his leash and stroll the hallways; others enjoy his quiet attentiveness while they read a book aloud; some benefit simply from lying down next to his warm body.

While scheduled one-on-one time with Charlie is often a reward for achieving a goal or exhibiting positive behavior, Bruso says an unplanned visit with him is often the perfect intervention for a student who's struggling in the moment. "Kids with anxiety issues who might be reaching a crisis level, they'll want to come see Charlie," she said. "That distraction can flip the brain. His presence just calms them down."

Nichols heartily agrees. "There's a plethora of research about dogs and their impact on the nervous system," she said, adding that Maverick — named after the lead role in Nichols' favorite movie, *Top Gun* — is naturally intuitive and senses when a student needs a little extra nurture.

"If someone's upset or crying, he'll move toward them in such a gentle way so they can pet him," she explained. "We wrote into one student's support plan to come in every day, mid-day, and brush him. It was so cool to watch their relationship develop. And



Lakeland principal, Angie Nichols, and her school therapy dog, Maverick. Photo by Barb Mosher



Mill Creek's therapy dog Charlie never minds being the center of attention. Photo by Barb Mosher

definitely, from beginning to end, the student's emotional bandwidth, their ability to cope with the stress of the day, was much larger."

Like Charlie, Maverick's days start with saying hello. Before students arrive, he joins Nichols in her rounds, greeting teachers and support staff throughout the building. After students are settled into classrooms, Maverick takes up his favorite spot under the counter of the main office, happy to doze until a child needs him. Sometimes, he's a reward for a student who's been recognized with the daily Elk HERD award for demonstrating behavior that's honest, engaged, respectful, and disciplined; ten minutes with Maverick is often the prize of choice.

And when it's time for silent reading in Annie Grammer's fifth grade classroom, one of her students fetches Maverick from the office to join them. "It's after recess, so the students come in hyped up," Grammer said. "There's something about the calm he brings to the room. It helps the kids settle down and get back to learning. I have a couple of students who also spend (one-on-one) time with him, which is really helpful in regulating their systems."

Bruso said Charlie also has a knack for singling out a child in need of compassion. She recalled a kindergartener who was crying in the hallway one morning as kids were making their way to classrooms. "It was a busy time, and I was talking to someone, but I saw him go to her and sit on her foot," she said. "He did that on his own, so I went over and introduced them to each other. It stopped her crying. Just his presence flipped that switch."

Without doing much other than being themselves, Charlie and Maverick have quickly earned the respect and appreciation of staff and the adoration of hundreds of children. Both dogs have official school IDs, and their school photos will appear in the respective yearbooks — fitting acknowledgement for their unique roles in helping students at Mill Creek and Lakeland thrive.

"When Maverick needs a day off, the kids are always asking where he is," Nichols said. "They love him and have come to expect him to be here."

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