

Therapy dogs bring ‘one more layer of community’ to The Salvation Army Booth Program

GO TEAM Therapy Dogs make regular visits to The Salvation Army Booth Program for Young Parents.

“‘Dog Day’ is our favorite day of the month,” said Kim Kelzer, Social Worker and Program Coordinator for The Salvation Army Boise (Idaho) Corps’ [Booth Program for Young Parents](#).

Every third Wednesday, “Dog Day,” [GO TEAM Therapy Dogs](#) and their handlers visit [Cardinal Academy, a charter high school](#) for pregnant and parenting youth located on The Salvation Army’s Boise campus. The Booth Program, which provides wrap-around services for the students, coordinates the visits, now in the fourth year.

Kelzer said students and staff anticipate the visits.

“Being in school is anxiety-producing; being a parent as a teenager is anxiety-producing. Those things together are a lot,” she said, adding the visits also benefit the staff. “It’s just a great de-stressor. It helps settle everybody down.”

GO TEAM Therapy Dogs is a non-profit organization that trains handler/dog teams to offer comfort to people in such settings as crisis zones, hospitals, airports and schools. Each team undergoes training, including the AKC-approved [Good Canine Citizenship](#) test.

GO TEAM started in 2012 in response to the Waldo Canyon Fire near Colorado Springs, Colorado, with two teams. Since then, more than 1,000 teams have completed the training, and GO TEAM groups serve throughout the United States and in some overseas locations.

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Brenda Mallindine

Southern Idaho Coordinator and Boise Corps Administrator Major Premek Kramerius said the therapy dogs have contributed to Booth Program participants’ overall well-being.



“The partnership with Go Team Idaho is helping our students feel better and be less stressed,” he said. “Improving emotional responses, reducing anxiety and communication functioning are priorities for our Booth Program.”

A report published by the [National Institutes of Health](#) found short-term, unstructured interactions with a therapy dog can significantly reduce anxiety and stress, noting that a dog may serve as both a comforting, nonjudgmental presence as well as a positive tactile and sensory diversion.

On Dog Day, about six dogs and their handlers visit students and staff for about an hour. Some of the teams are regulars, like Brenda Mallindine, who visits with Buster, a 5-year-old Bouvier des Flandres/Bernedoodle mix.

During their years of visits, Mallindine and Buster have seen students graduate and babies become toddlers.

“Everybody [from GO TEAM] loves going to Cardinal Academy,” she said. “We get to interact with the babies, and we get to interact with students and the staff...It’s a special place in a lot of women’s hearts, because these [young couples are having babies so early in life](#), and we just want to support them as much as possible.”

During the holiday visit in December, the therapy dog teams bring diapers, wipes and other baby supplies for the students. At the October visit, the dogs wear Halloween costumes.



Courtesy Booth Program for Young Parents & Brenda Mallindine.

Mallandine said she enjoys watching students connect with the dogs.

“I remember when I was in high school—you’ve got a lot going on,” she said. “You’re trying to figure out what you’re going to do, who you are, who you want to be. There’s nothing more grounding than getting on the ground or on the floor with the dog and petting them and feeling that connection. Whether you’re a student, or whoever, that kind of puts everything back in perspective.”

For DJ, a student and father, having the dogs helps reduce anxiety. “It also gets my daughter used to being around dogs,” he added.

And he’s not alone—program participants often share the experience with their children.

“I like having family time all together when the dogs are here,” said Bryleigh, a student and mother.

Students and staff also collect the dogs’ trading cards—Kelzer has more than 40 cards displayed on her office wall. Each card has the dog’s photo and specifics including breed, birthdate and favorite activities.

During the visits, Kelzer said students go from dog to dog.

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“They sit with them, but they’re also talking to the handlers,” she said. “So they’re getting that interaction, too. A lot of our students, they’re here, and this is a safe place for them, and then they’re at home. Sometimes home’s a safe place, and sometimes it’s not. It just depends. But this is one more layer of community.”

Mallindine said students will put their faces right up to the dogs’ faces.

“They lay down with them,” she said. “They just have those zen moments with the dog. It’s amazing to watch.”

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