



A Sheriff's Dog's Tale

by Duffy Kelly

Have you ever wondered if reading a book out loud to a dog could make a difference in this world? What about turning your dog into a canine sheriff, complete with an officer's badge and sheriff's deputy vest?

Well, Officer Simone of the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department's Youth Services Unit is a brown-eyed, golden retriever yellow lab mix who is living, four-legged proof that when it comes to kids, working like a dog works magic. She's a highly trained certified community therapy dog handled by Deputy Dana Vicory and Simone's trainer, Point West Rotarian Mary Lyn Kagan.

As part of the sheriff's unit, Simone high-tails it to schools in the Arden and Arcade areas wearing her uniform. Once there, she has a way of making kids come alive with tenderness and a desire to be close to her. So it was a natural fit, Kagan said, to mix a child's love of animals with the goal of teaching children to read.

Turns out Simone loves to be read to. And she's the first to understand that learning to read is, well, ruff. Kids who otherwise might not read aloud seem to open up to her like they would never open up with an adult or their peers. Seems Simone has a unique way of not embarrassing the early reader, or caring too much about a fumbled pronunciation. In fact, she's all ears, no matter what the story sounds like, and she shakes mistakes right off and keeps on listening.

This special canine reading program is giving kids the reading practice and confidence they need to excel, Kagan said.

Simone even carries her own "baseball card" along on her tutoring gigs. The card shows her photo on the front and displays a special message to kids on the back: "Simone wants you to know you are important to her and those around you. She hopes you will work hard in school and that you will be respectful to your parents, friends, teachers and neighbors. She wants you to say 'no' to drugs and gangs, help in your community and do what is right so you can grow up healthy and happy."

The program is just part of how the department's Community Impact Program is making strides with Arden-area youths. Simone patrols school campuses along with deputies.

Her mere presence alongside a deputy helps kids view deputies as friendly, approachable people.

By joining forces with business leaders, law enforcement agencies, faith-based organizations, rotary clubs, retired educators, parents and neighbors in the Arden-Arcade community, the sheriff's program is now paving the way for young people to participate in a host of other free extracurricular enrichment activities, from journalism to art to baseball to boxing to tutoring.

For instance, this past year students attending Encina and Arden middle schools were given the opportunity to be part of a rugby development and competition program held at Encina High School's football field. It's all thanks to people like Kagan, officers like Simone and deputies like Vicory, as well as donations and grants from public and private entities.

The program organizers are relying on involvement from the community and welcome donations and grants as well as ideas and volunteers. For more information or to offer your ideas, go to sacscip.org or email

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