

Doggy Daily promotes kindness to all

Delaware students learning 'emotional literacy' in classroom

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Imagine all the articles of a newspaper centered on stories of kindness.

Now, imagine what that newspaper might look like.

This is what the fourth-graders at Delaware Elementary School are creating: a newspaper whose message is to be kind to all living creatures in their school and their community. The newspaper is called The Des Moines Doggy Daily and is based on the lessons from the CritterKin series of books written by Jena Ball.

Jennifer Houlette, a fourth-grade teacher at the school, said her class is focusing on a general theme of kindness in the classroom and this pro-

ject fit perfectly with that theme.

"I really wanted kindness to be a focus this year," Houlette said. "(The other fourth-grade teachers and I) have talked to the author of these books and tried to focus on kindness toward animals and toward other kids."

The project started when Houlette read one of the CritterKin books called "Lead with Your Heart" to a previous class. The book series centers around a variety of dog characters and their trainer named Ms. Jenaia. Houlette recognized the theme of kindness in the books and sought out the author to help engage her students in that theme.

Ball said she was more than eager to help. About

a year ago Ball began a program called the Be Kind Initiative, which took the CritterKin series and expanded it to help implement projects, like The Des Moines Doggy Daily, into the classrooms nationwide to "give kids a chance not only to read and write, but experience and practice emotional literacy."

CritterKin basis of newspaper

"The central belief that we all operate on at CritterKin is that story and characters are how we learn, this is how human beings make sense of their world," said the North Carolina-based author. "So if you start with a good story that has elements of what you want the kids to work on and latch onto in their brain, then the projects will naturally evolve."

So, the process began for the Delaware Elemen-

tary fourth-graders.

Each week for six weeks the students listened to Ball read from her book, "Lead with Your Heart," about the misunderstood pit bull named Lance who overcomes prejudice and fear with the help of the human characters in the book.

But it's not an old-fashioned sit-and-read: the author is connected to the kids from Google's video-sharing technology called Google Hangouts, which allows her to talk, interact, share and record the sessions with the students from her residence in North Carolina.

Ball said the collaboration between students and teachers lead to the beginnings of the idea for the newspaper.

Then the students got to work. With each week, they added new pieces to the newspaper. They named it, created a logo and researched, interviewed and photographed

staff members at the Animal Rescue League of Iowa. The students wrote articles and drafted columns. They are now in the designing phase of the newspaper, which is set to be published in digital and print editions in late November.

Students also giving back

After a visit from the animal rescue league's humane educator Cicely Gordon and her rescue dog, Foxy, the students also began collecting dog and cat food, as well as toys and other items to donate. They will give the league their donations during a trip to the Animal Rescue League of Iowa on Nov. 24.

Houlette said this project is actively teaching her students character skills.

"We're teaching them to be kind to animals which is teaching them to

be kind to one another," she said. "The biggest lesson I want them to learn is to think of little ways they can be kind to others. It's about getting them into the habit of doing things that are kind, not necessarily because you will get a thank you, but just because it's the right thing to do."

And she's seen it work in the classroom.

"(The students) are constantly asking when they can do something kind for somebody else, they're excited about it," Houlette said. "They want to step up and be leaders in kindness."

"If you give students something concrete to do it will not only answer their questions, but it allows them to feel empowered, like they are making a difference," Ball said. "Evoking empathy and compassion is one thing, but then looking at how you can make it real for kids is another thing."