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Therapy dogs make a difference in helping kids navigate sorrow

by John Johnston

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Fernside executive director Vicky Ott initially wasn't sure therapy dogs should be part of the agency's grief program.

Then on a Saturday morning last summer she met a girl at Fernside's camp for kids ages 7-12. The girl was crying during a sharing circle, in which children talk about the loved one who died. She said her stomach hurt, and she wanted to go home.

Ott knew that the Canine Angels - a group of dog handlers, most of whom live in Northern Kentucky - were bringing dogs to the camp that afternoon. The dogs are registered through Therapy Dogs Inc. She urged the girl to stay until then.

The girl was Maggie Castelli, 9, of White Oak. She was at camp with her sister, Claudia, 11. Their father, Joe, died of pancreatic cancer a year and a half ago.

Later that day, Ott felt someone tugging on her. It was Maggie.

"I didn't even recognize her, she looked so different. She had this huge smile on her face. She said, 'I feel so much better.' I said, 'Do you think it's the dogs?'"

Yes, she said.

"It really made me a believer in incorporating these dogs into our program," Ott said.

About a half-dozen dogs come to Fernside programs.

"The dogs are not judgmental, so they're not going to make people feel uncomfortable, particularly kids who maybe feel they are being singled out because something different happened to them," said Chris Miller of Edgewood, who brings her collie Daisy to Fernside.

"Sometimes when you're petting a dog, you're going to feel a little bit better about talking about what's bothering you."



Canine Angels member Linda Jones of Aurora, Ind., and her therapy dog, Brodie, with Fernside campers at Camp Kern last summer. *Provided*