

# Pet project

Amy helps kids, dogs learn together

**BY KRISTIN BULL** Amy Johnson always has believed in the potential of animal-assisted therapy. Today, she is immersed in its proof.

Three years ago, Amy, a former teacher, created Teacher's Pet. The innovative program pairs shelter dogs with schoolkids who are emotionally or cognitively impaired for a combination of mentoring and dog obedience.

The dogs, many of which are rescued from abusive situations, have problems sitting still and following directions. They often need help socializing.

In teaching the dogs to overcome their behavior problems, the students learn to solve similar problems in themselves.

"In identifying signs of stress in dogs and teaching the dogs how to deal with stress, they can apply these lessons to themselves and their peers," says Amy, 37, of Rochester Hills.

"The students take so much pride in what the dog learns. They have said, 'Who knows what would have happened to the dog if it wasn't for me?'"

Teacher's Pet runs two 10-week sessions at Kingsley Montgomery School in Waterford. The school serves students in north-west Oakland County.

Each session pairs six middle and high school students with their own dog for twice-weekly meetings.

Through the program, led by Amy and a team of volunteers, students teach the dogs to sit, stay and walk on a leash.

If they master these skills, the dogs can learn to fetch, shake or roll.

At the end of the 10 weeks, the

newly obedient dogs are put up for adoption. So far, all of the 25 Teacher's Pet dogs have found homes.

Amy's passion for animals and her passion for children motivate her work with Teacher's Pet.

"I feel like this is my calling," says Amy, a lifelong animal lover who grew up rescuing abandoned rabbits and birds.

"It is very cleansing. ... The thought of going through life solely for myself feels bad. If people have to seek out a purpose, then this is mine."

During the program, Amy watches a transformation in the students. Demeanor improves; attendance soars. Their parents appreciate the lessons their kids learn from working with the dogs.

Amy, who works as a special projects coordinator at Oakland University, plans to expand Teacher's Pet to other school districts and someday have her own kennel.

"I could be having the worst day ever, but when I get to school and see the kids interacting with their dogs, by the time I leave I am whistling," Amy says.

**Kristin is a Rochester Hills-based writer. Reach her at [kbull17@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kbull17@sbcglobal.net).**



Amy Johnson, 37, of Rochester Hills shows student Brendan Kuzma, Mercedes, a German shepherd mix, at Kingsley Montgomery School.

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## HOW TO HELP

Teacher's Pet is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The program accepts monetary donations in addition to donations of dog food, leashes, collars and office supplies. It is in need of volunteers to work with dogs and students. To adopt a dog or contact Amy Johnson, go to [www.teacherspetmichigan.org](http://www.teacherspetmichigan.org) or call 248.930.2909.

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