

Denison High to get therapy dog

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There's a saying that every dog has its day. But how many dogs have a first day of school?

In just a few months' time, Denison High School will welcome Denali, an eight-week-old Golden Retriever-mix, onto its special education team for the purposes of putting students at ease and teaching them a thing or two about responsibility. The young pup will be trained and certified as an emotional-therapy dog and will work full time with students at the school upon the completion of her K-9 coursework.

Denison Independent School District Special Education Diagnostician Stacie Garcia adopted Denali only days ago, but said her personality has already proven her a great fit for the role.

"She's just a really good and compassionate dog," Garcia said. "You can tell that already by the way she walks up and greets everyone that walks in."

Garcia got the idea to introduce a dog into the district's special ed program after finding the presence of a therapy dog has positive effects on students who sometimes struggle in the school environment

"The research behind it says that behavior referrals will go down," Garcia said. "The kids will be able to feel a little calmer and they'll be able to better cope with their emotions."

In light of her unique role, Denali was given to Garcia free of charge by Blair Farms, a Denison-based breeder of show dogs. Garcia said all she had to do was let the breeder know what traits she wanted and they made the match. “They knew what kind of dog I needed, so they just watched for the one that was calm and collected and very, very sweet,” Garcia said. “We ended up with her and she’s perfect.”

Denali’s main goal will be to reduce students’ stress, whether it comes from testing or the general social anxieties of high school. Garcia said Denali will also aid in life lessons.

“She’ll help them learn some caretaking responsibilities while in the classroom,” Garcia said. “They’ll help feed her, walk her, spend time with her outside and make her comfortable.”

And even in the dog days of summer, Denali will still be serving students.

“During the summer months, I work with our elementary level kids with autism and she’ll be coming with me to work with them,” Garcia said. “There’s also a program where they take therapy dogs to elementary schools and kids can read to them. That will help to build their reading skills and I hope to get her involved in that, too.”

Garcia brought Denali up to Denison High on Friday for a brief meet-and-greet and said both students and staff found her absolutely fetching.

“I can’t tell you how many people have offered to watch her for a little while I go take care of something,” Garcia said. “But I know what they really want.”