



Meet Gracie, An Emotional Support Dog

October 7, 2020

Gracie, a 1-year-old beagle-poodle mix, is a working dog in the truest sense, and she's missing her job these days.

Gracie is owned by Brian Wortel and Connie Scott, and she works as an emotional support dog at Monee Education Center, where Wortel is principal. Like many schools across the area, Wortel's school is not currently holding in-person learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it's been a big adjustment for Gracie.

"When I do go in the building, it's empty, and she doesn't like that," Wortel said.

Monee Education Center, a school for sixth- through 12th-grade students in Crete-Monee School District 201-U, serves general education and special education students who benefit from a smaller school environment and non-traditional teaching methods. Gracie is part of those non-traditional methods, but Wortel hopes including an emotional support dog in a school setting becomes more traditional.

He advocated for years to bring an emotional support dog to his school, and now that he has seen how far-reaching the positive effects have been, he continues to advocate for their presence in schools. "It's hard not to feel better when you have a dog on your lap licking your face," Wortel said. "They just love you for who you are."

Wortel has almost always had a dog in his life, but when he adopted Gracie he hadn't had a dog for awhile. Wortel and Scott's previous dog passed away at a younger age than they had expected, and while they weren't opposed to getting another dog, they weren't specifically looking for one either.

Then Gracie visited Wortel's school for an assembly with a group of puppies, and she won him over instantly. "It felt good to have a dog in my lap again," he said. The rest, as they say, is history. At first, Wortel thought he would bring Gracie to school with him three or four days a week, but she soon started coming with him every day. "She wanted to be with me at work every day, and having her home didn't do much good for the kids who needed her that day," he said.

Like many others, Gracie has mostly been working from home these days, making occasional appearances on teleconferences with Wortel. He said he isn't sure that Gracie knows what is going on when he is online with students and staff, but her ears always perk up like she's really listening.

While Wortel has long believed in the advantages of having a dog at school to provide emotional support to the school community, even he has been surprised by how positive the experience with Gracie has been. "We knew this was going to be a good thing (for the school community), but we didn't know how good."

And although Gracie is officially there to help students, the staff at the school have benefitted too. "She's there for the adults just as much as the students," Wortel said. One of Gracie's gifts is knowing who needs her the most at any given time. Wortel said each school day starts with a brief staff meeting, and Gracie always knows just who to go to to improve their day.

For now, Gracie's work as an emotional support dog is in an unofficial capacity, but plans are in the works to make it official. She was scheduled to visit Florida earlier this year to attend a training program and become certified, but those plans were delayed by the COVID pandemic. For now, she'll continue her work unofficially and travel to Florida once the training is permitted.

"I've had some good dogs in my life, but she is something special," he said. "She's been a blessing in disguise."

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Gracie is one of the many fabulous pooches from the Forest Preserve District of Will County's dog parks who will be featured in our 2021 dog park calendar.