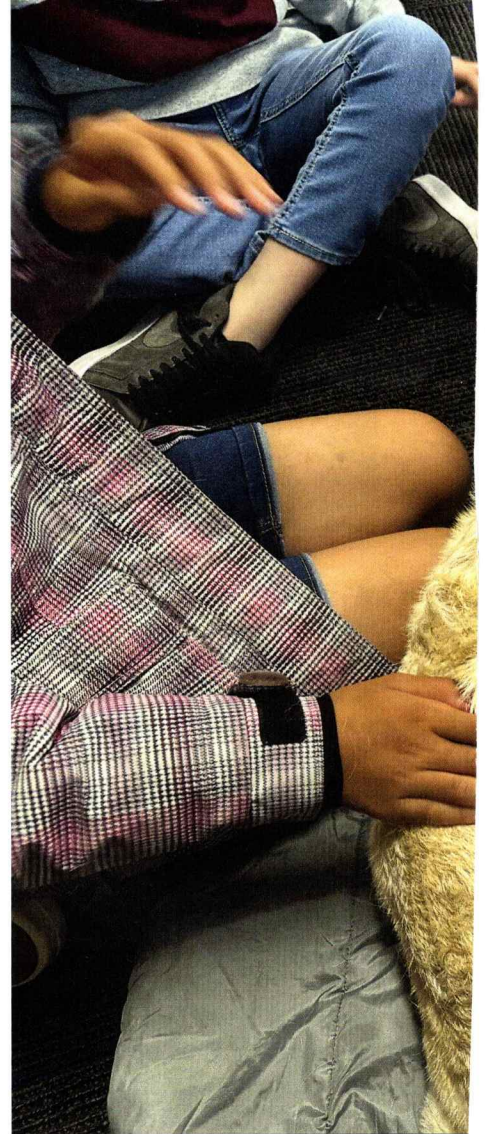


in their Debt

By Jen Reeder

Ready to RUMBLE

Lab charms students as therapy dog in Read With Me program.



Once a week at Brookhaven Elementary School in Eagle Mountain, Utah, fourth-grade students hope for the hottest ticket in town: a chance to be a “Rumble Reader.”

Rumble Readers get to sit in a circle and take turns reading a book to a yellow Lab named Rumble. The five-year-old cuddle enthusiast is a non-judgmental listener who helps kids feel more confident reading.

His handler, Megan Stewart, says students often turn the book to show Rumble the pictures, or put their own glasses on his face to “help” the dog read along. He typically responds by using the students as pillows. This just encourages kids to ask to keep reading; since he’s asleep, they’ll ask to read another book to avoid disturbing Rumble – an adorable win for children’s literacy.

Plus, it brightens everyone’s day.

“One girl told me she felt like a ‘goddess’ because Rumble had chosen her lap to lay his head in,” Stewart recalls. “She was so happy.”

She’s witnessed touching interactions as well. Once, a boy asked if he could have some private time with Rumble while Stewart talked with his teacher. When she saw him drop his head into Rumble’s fur, looking upset, she asked if he was okay and learned his grandfather had just died.

“He told me, ‘But having Rumble here just makes me feel so much better.’ So I asked him a few questions about his grandpa, and we talked about the loss,” she says. “Those extra few minutes with Rumble were what he needed at the time to help that grief process, so I was glad we could be there for him.”

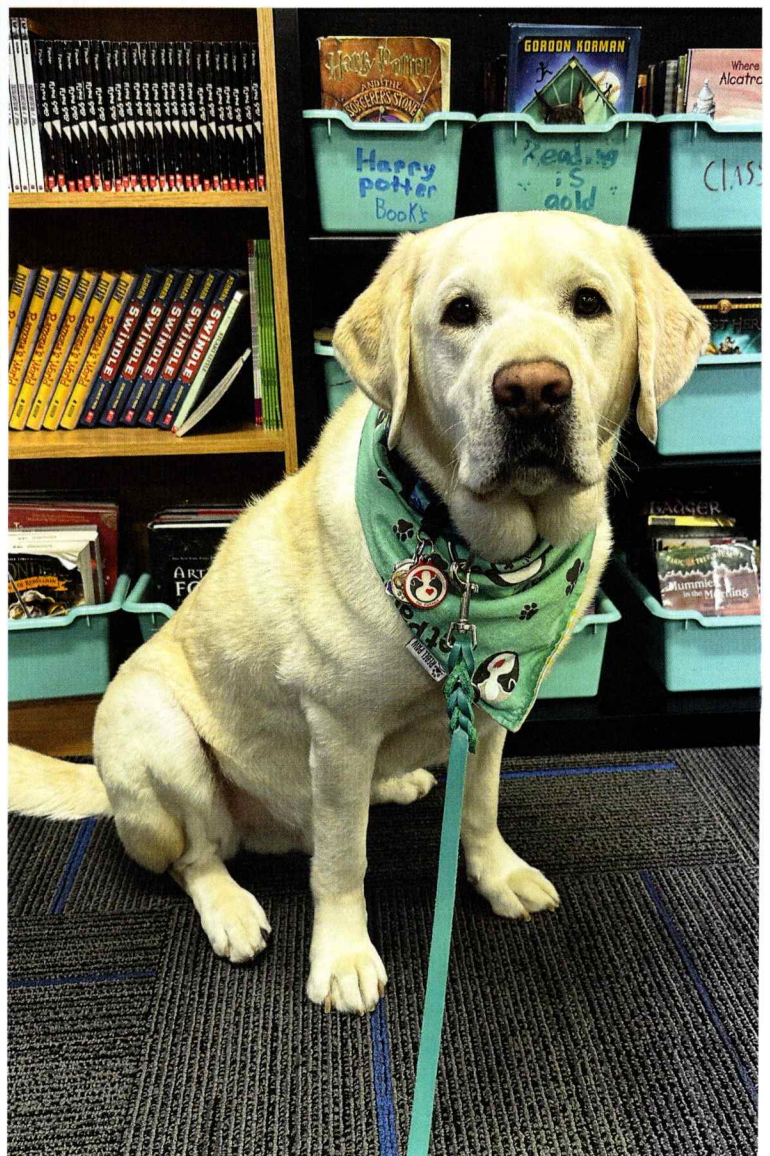
Other children have learned to overcome their fear of dogs thanks to Rumble’s gentle demeanor. One child finally held his tail after several weeks of edging closer and ultimately became “smitten” – grinning as Rumble licked his face.

“He’s just a squishy, comforting dog,” Stewart says.



Rumble Readers at Brookhaven Elementary. Looks like a tough job for Rumble!

Rumble volunteers with Utah Pet Partners for the Read With Me program.



She's known Rumble since he was a squishy puppy she was raising as a volunteer for Guide Dogs for the Blind – one of many pups she's raised over the past 23 years for the nonprofit. But he was released from the program after being diagnosed with a liver shunt. (He's since had a successful surgery and is off medications.)

Because Rumble loves people so much, she decided he would enjoy being a therapy dog. She chose to have him evaluated by the Utah chapter of Pet Partners because of the nonprofit's Read With Me program, and he passed with "flying colors."

For his part, Rumble seems delighted with the career change and gets excited each week when they get to Brookhaven Elementary School.

"As soon as he gets in the building, he just runs me to the classroom, to his corner, and he flops himself down and is like, 'Hey, where's my kids? I'm ready,'" Stewart says with a laugh. "In the Rumble Reader groups, when it's not their turn to read, the kids are holding his paws and playing with his tail, and he's just in heaven. He soaks up all the love."



Rumbles loves time with Rumble Readers at Brookhaven Elementary.



Afterward, they hit a local coffee shop for Rumble's reward: a "pup cup" of whipped cream topped with a dog treat. So Rumble loves all aspects of his job – except the bath he gets before visits. (It took four years, but he's finally accepted that baths lead to fun and now willingly gets into the bathtub on his own.)

In fact, the Lab loves his job so much that once a month, he visits nursing school students at Arizona College of Nursing in Salt Lake City to offer stress relief before exams. He's also spread comfort and cheer at children's summer camps, colleges during final exams, and high school Hope Squad events, which aim to prevent suicide.

Stewart, a professional baker, often meets people who tell her about their own Labs. In fact, because Labs are such popular family dogs, Rumble's breed helps put people at ease almost immediately, she says.

Megan Stewart and Rumble.

His distinctive personality wins them over, too. "He's really easygoing, and kind of a couch potato. We call him an 'inside boy.' He'd rather snuggle than go for hikes and swims and all those adventure-type things. He just wants a snack and a cuddle," she says, adding that at home, Rumble "cuddles" her two golden retrievers, Frontier and Joxer, by draping himself over them.

Rumble is one of 668 Labs registered with Pet Partners, which has more than 7,500 therapy animal teams in North America, including all 50 U.S. states, according to Mary Margaret Callahan, Chief Mission Officer at Pet Partners. Labs are the second most registered breed (after golden retrievers).

"We believe that people's lives and their well-being are improved when spent in the company of animals, so Pet Partners strives to provide positive animal experiences through our fabulous volunteers," she says. "All those Lab owners out there know their lives are enriched by animals."

Labs and other therapy animals visit schools, as Rumble does, as well as retirement homes, airports, libraries, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, skilled nursing facilities, workplaces, and disaster areas. In addition to dogs – who are on 92 percent of teams – Pet Partners registers equines, cats, rabbits, llamas/ alpacas, guinea pigs, birds, pigs, and rats.

There's always a need for more therapy animal teams, according to Callahan, who noted participation declined during the pandemic but seems to be rebounding. She's grateful for volunteers like Stewart who choose to share their pets' unconditional love with others.

"People who volunteer with their therapy animals have an unbelievably trusting bond," she says. "I see these teams going out and doing community service in their area and to me, it highlights how beautiful that bond is." 🐾

For more information about Pet Partners, visit: PetPartners.org. Follow Rumble on Instagram: @rumble.dog.with.a.job. All photos courtesy of Megan Stewart.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.

SHOULD YOUR LAB BE A THERAPY DOG?

Volunteering as a therapy dog team with a Lab can be a fun and rewarding way to give back to your community. (Full disclosure: The author volunteered for five years at a Colorado hospital with her Lab, Rio.) While it might seem like obedience skills would be the most important quality in a therapy dog, the top trait is an affiliative nature, according to Mary Margaret Callahan, Chief Mission Officer for the nonprofit Pet Partners.

"The biggest thing is to ask, 'Is my dog going to enjoy interacting with people they have not met yet?'" she says. "Colleen Pelar, an amazing speaker who was a professional dog trainer for 25 years, once said that the best therapy dogs are ones who enter the room and are pretty sure the party's being thrown in their honor. They're like, 'I'm here. This is me. Let the festivities begin.'"

Incidentally, Pet Partners hopes to double the number of therapy animal teams with cats, so if you have a Lab as well as a cat with a Lab-like personality, they can join the party, too.

Rumble loves pup cups after therapy dog work.

