

in their
Debt

By Jen Reeder



PHOTO COURTESY OAK GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Therapy Lab Radar zones in on stress relief for students at Minnesota's Oak Grove Middle School.

A black Lab named Radar padded down a middle school hallway when he noticed a boy hunched over on the floor, sobbing into his lap. The tears didn't frighten the therapy dog. Instead, Radar gently pushed his head onto the student's lap to investigate.

Brian Ingemann and Radar.

The child cried and cried onto Radar's head. Then he started petting him. Eventually his chest stopped heaving. As he pulled himself together and stood up, Radar's handler, Brian Ingemann, offered him the dog's leash. Would he like to walk with Radar to class?

Definitely.

"Radar helped him pull out of that spiral," recalls Ingemann, principal of Oak Grove Middle School in Bloomington, Minnesota. "You have to understand: It's hard for adults at times to manage their emotions. It's very complicated for kids, and that's where a dog comes in. Radar is going to show up and always give love and attention."

In the six years since Radar began working as a campus therapy dog, Ingemann has witnessed the Lab's positive effect on countless students. The principal initially hoped to bring a service dog puppy in training to campus to reduce stress for students in the wake of nationwide school shootings – as well as the typical challenges of middle school.

He asked for and received permission from the school district to bring a dog onto the campus, but a placement didn't pan out. Fortunately, the superintendent learned about a young Lab named Radar who'd been trained at a women's prison to become a therapy dog, and was available to work at Oak Grove if Ingemann was interested.

The lifelong Lab lover jumped at the chance. Ingemann felt the breed's hallmark intellect and friendly demeanor could be a perfect fit for his school.

"Labs just have a different way of interacting with people," he says.

Ingemann welcomed Radar into his family – which included a black Lab named Toby – and the two started training together at the middle school. Radar needed to get used to the bells, fire alarms, and hallways crowded with people on a campus of approximately 720 students.

Their efforts paid off. Radar doesn't flinch when throngs of young people reach out to pet the popular pooch. Three days a week, students can visit Radar in the administration offices, request to take him for walks during lunch (with adult supervision), or sit alongside him during therapy sessions with counselors.

"Middle school is a difficult time in an adolescent's life. Some kids come and visit Radar quite often because they're just stressed out and their life is dysregulated at



PHOTO COURTESY OAK GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Byron Robles is pretty happy that his school has a therapy dog, and specifically, Radar.



PHOTO COURTESY OAK GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

home," Ingemann says. "He draws himself to whoever walks in the room. He acts like he knows everybody. It's like walking into your house and your dog knows you."

Frequently Ingemann will open the door to his office in the morning and discover several students hanging out on the floor with Radar. He's always in demand. In fact, during an interview for this article, a student dropped by to read Radar a note she wrote about how much she loves him.

The laid-back Lab is also a hit with members of the staff, who take breaks to sit with him on the couch while he gazes into their eyes or drapes his body across their legs.

"Staff love seeing Radar," he says with a chuckle. "They'll come out and say, 'This is my fifth distraction of the day.' They're such big animal lovers."

While Radar is renowned for being unflappably calm – he never bites, barks, or reacts in a variety of situations – he also knows a special cue called "jump for joy" that always brings laughter and smiles.



PHOTO COURTESY OAK GROVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

“It’s hard for adults at times to manage their emotions. It’s very complicated for kids, and that’s where a dog comes in. Radar is going to show up and always give love and attention.”

"He can stand in the middle of a group and just jump straight up and down – in a controlled way that doesn't hurt people," Ingemann shares. "He leaps and it's vertical. It's funny."

Radar also coaxes shy students out of their shells simply by being himself. "When Radar is doing that walk around the hallways, it brings up students who typically won't talk much," he says. "But when he comes, they'll ask, 'Can I pet Radar?' and share stories like, 'I have a dog...'; 'I have a cat...'; or, 'I just lost a dog.' Kids just open up and love to see him."

After a full day at school charming so many people with his antics and affection, Radar heads home and sleeps on the couch for three hours straight – often while the newest addition

to the family, a black Lab named Breezer, curls up next to him.

Ingemann is grateful that Radar “oozes affection” both at home and at school. Radar makes his job easier – and more fun. “I’ve had people tell me that they are excited to come to school because there’s a therapy dog here,” he says.

That’s true for eighth grader Byron Robles, 14. The first time he saw Radar at school three years ago, he was immediately impressed by how calm the Lab seemed.

“He was helping people on a mat,” he recalls. “I’ve liked dogs for a long time, and I was pretty happy that there was a dog at Oak Grove, to be honest.”

Over the years, Robles has grown fond of Radar, often taking him for walks. He thinks other schools should consider adding a therapy dog like Radar because the

Lab is so good at calming people down, and since he’s so friendly.

So what’s the best thing about Radar, in his opinion?

“He plays with me,” Robles says. “When I say, ‘Jump for joy,’ he’ll jump with me.” 🐾

Follow Radar’s adventures on Instagram: @ogmshusky.



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.

