

HOMETOWN FEATURE

Therapy dog brings calming influence to CNE campuses

Clermont Northeastern's newest staff member joined the school district in January, spends time in all four CNE buildings, works for free – and can even teach students how to properly wear masks.

His name is Mr. McGillis. He is 1-year-old, and is already one of the most popular faces – and tails – in the district.

Mr. McGillis, or Gillis, is a yellow Labrador retriever, assigned to CNE as a therapy dog by Circle Tail, a Pleasant Plain-based organization that also trains hearing and service dogs. The district has been working with Circle Tail since last fall, and Gillis was placed for the second semester. While CNE has had volunteers bring dogs in for reading times at the elementary school, Gillis is the first canine with a full-time placement in the district. CNE has requested a second dog from Circle Tail, as well.

District Dean of Students Travis Dorsey is Gillis's main handler while the dog is on campus, and then takes the dog home with him at night, where he joins the family's other pet, an 8-year-old chocolate Lab. That's one of the requirements Circle Tail has for prospective partner schools, though the dog is assigned to the school and not to the family.

Leslie Kreines has created and leads the facility program for Circle Tail, where she is a volunteer, and helped place Gillis with CNE.

"Gillis is actually still considered in his internship," Kreines said. "They way we do it is we offer a three-month internship. That's where Circle Tail owns the dog and pays for all of the supplies and the crates and everything, and then at the end of the internship we evaluate if the dog is happy and the school is happy, then we have a contract that they can move into permanent placement.

Circle Tail, which celebrated its 24th anniversary Feb. 6, is the only organization of its type in the Tristate area to have an International ADI (Assistance Dogs International) accreditation. It began as a service organization training foster and rescue dogs in the area of mobility, hearing and diabetic alert, and now works with six area school districts, including CNE, Lakota, Mason and St. Xavier, as well as firehouses.

Dogs are placed at no cost to the partner; Circle Tail pays for the supplies and crates, "and then at the end of the internship we evaluate if the dog is happy



Clermont Northeastern Dean of Students T.J. Dorsey takes Gillis, the school's therapy dog, home at night.

T.J. DORSEY/PROVIDED

and the school is happy, then we have a contract that they can move into permanent placement," Kreines said.

So far, CNE is happy.

"In the short time that he has been here it has been a success not only for our students who have struggled with all of the changes in routine this year, but also for our staff who are also dealing with such unpredictability and loss," Dorsey said.

"CNE has already seen incredible returns on our investment by having the dog on campus daily. He has been used multiple times to de-escalate situations, He also helps students who struggle with attendance but love animals find purpose to come to school daily."

All four CNE schools – the high school, middle school and elementary school on Hutchinson Road, and the preschool in Owensville – benefit from Gillis's service. The dog has met more than 500 students and staff since joining the district last month, and is a presence even when students are not in school. Dorsey brought Gillis to campus when CNE was remote to meet custodial and other staff, and help the dog get acclimated to the surroundings, Kreines said.

Should CNE return to remote or hybrid learning, Gillis will still be involved.

"We have pictures of dogs on Zoom meetings, doing Zoom sessions with the dogs, (students) asking questions of the

dogs, the dogs doing some teaching lessons through Zoom and virtual learning," Kreines said. While the dogs don't wear masks, they have a role.

"They have put on masks and shot videos in demo, how to wear a mask properly. All are dogs are trained in advance service skills, so when they get retrained to be a facility dog, they can do things like turn on and off lights, open doors, throw garbage away, help a child with autism to lay down on their lap,"

Kreines said.

Dorsey hopes to train other staff members to work with Gillis; Kreines said training has been slowed by the coronavirus pandemic, but she hopes they can do more in-person training in the summer.

For more information on Circle Tail, visit circletail.org; email info@circletail.org, or call 513-877-3325.

*Dick Maloney,
Clermont Northeastern Schools*

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