

Good morning

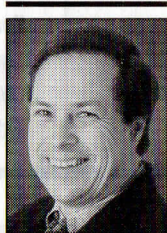
Trauma therapy dogs help suburban teens with test angst

We all know about the healing power of a dog.

In the days after the horrific school shooting in Newtown, Conn., a group of seven golden retrievers and their handlers from the suburbs, part of the K9 Comfort Dogs Ministry in Addison, went to the community of Sandy Hook Elementary School to let the traumatized kids and parents spend some spirit-rejuvenating time with dogs. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, therapy dogs helped soothe the miseries of people left homeless.

Now, the power of these highly trained dogs is taking on another anxiety-inducing suburban phenomenon — high school finals testing.

The trauma of seeing your teacher and fellow first-graders slaughtered by a murderous gunman clearly can't be compared to the normal anxiety of a 17-year-old trying to decide whether to enroll in the A or the B on a standardized test, but that doesn't mean the dogs can't be useful. For last weekend's "Exam Cram" at the Downers Grove Public Library, the Hinsdale Humane Society brought in highly trained pet therapy dogs to assist high



Burt Constable

school students preparing for final exams in the competitive suburbs.

"In this particular area, there is so much pressure on these students," says Lori Halligan, executive director of the Hinsdale Humane Society. That pressure generally comes from parents, Halligan adds.

Teens have been told that scoring a couple of points higher on a final might make the difference between an A and a B, and that an A might make the difference between getting into the "dream school" or settling for a lesser college. Parents will tell you that grade-point average also might determine how much scholarship money a school will provide. Adding to the pressure is the underlying implication that a lesser college might make the difference between landing in a great career or just working a job, and that might determine whether you have a swell life or an endless struggle.



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• **VIDEOS:** See how dogs ease test stress.

If a dog can help kids relax before a test, more power to them.

"It was wonderful. The students loved it," says Lynette Pitrak, teen services coordinator at the Downers Grove Public Library. The handlers walked through packed meeting rooms and "just asked if people wanted to pet a dog."

All but a handful of the 150 to 200 teens studying for their upcoming finals opted to spend some time with a therapy dog, Pitrak says.

"Everybody at least wanted to pet a dog," Pitrak says. "A lot of the dogs would do tricks, like giving high-fives."

Sunday's dogs — a cocker spaniel, a golden retriever, a small, white Coton de Tulear and a pit bull — were big hits, Pitrak adds.

"We try to have it very relaxing," Pitrak says of the study



COURTESY OF DEBORAH KRAUS

The Hinsdale Humane Society brought in trained therapy dogs to help teens deal with the stress of final exams while studying this weekend at the Downers Grove Public Library. Gay Pol-litt, left, with her dog, Delilah, and Mary Beth Turek with her dog, Maggie, were part of a team that visited with nearly 200 students.

areas that include snacks and drinks. But the dogs helped break the tension for stressed-out students.

"They'd take five minutes with the dog, and I think it was really great to have that break," Pitrak says. "We're definitely going to do this again for the spring exams."

While Halligan says she

thinks this is the first time dogs have been used to ease the stress of high-schoolers, universities such as Yale, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Connecticut have been utilizing therapy dogs in the lead-up to tests for years.

"One student said, 'This is the best thing UConn has ever

done,'" says Jo Ann Reynolds, the university's reserve services coordinator who has written an academic article about the UConn library's Paws to Relax program. "It gets bigger every semester."

If it works for college kids, it must help high school students, says Reynolds, who adds, "It's a shame to think you have to have so much stress in education."

With so much stress everywhere these days — from the morning commute to your work to the unemployment office to the busy suburban household — maybe we all could use a therapy dog at our side.

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The old-fashioned method of using people to raise spirits will be on display at basketball games tonight at Christian Liberty Academy, 502 W. Euclid Ave. in Arlington Heights. The Bill Spicer Fund-raising Night (\$5 tickets available at the door) will support local youth leader and high school sports referee Bill Spicer of Arlington Heights in his fight against a rare form of leukemia. For details, visit christianlibertyacademy.com.