

Youth and animals connect through camp

Hinsdale Humane Society's animal awareness camp sheds new light on familiar creatures

By Nick Schnell

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From the introductions to games and guest speakers, Monday morning at the Hinsdale Humane Society's "Adventures in Animal Awareness" camp was all about animals all the time.

The crowd of approximately 25 students in grades four through six anxiously awaited the arrival of their special guest, as they played a few games of "monkey-in-the-middle" and 21 questions and acted out some animal charades.

Kym Iffert, the Humane Society's Education Coordinator, organized this year's camp. Although the camp's days are full of fun and games, Iffert's main goal is teaching campers some useful knowledge along the way.

"We need to start out with basic education and really reach out to children. If we educate them well now, we can prevent a lot of the Downs, assisted by his service dog Garrison, taught campers how dogs can play an integral part in the someone's daily life.

Downs, a disabled veteran,



Carly Booth and Anna Becker get a chance to meet service dog Garrison up close during the Hinsdale Humane Society's "Adventures in Animal Awareness" camp on Monday. (Jim Slonoff photos)

Companions for Independence and the entire training process of service dogs.

He illustrated just how disciplined Garrison is, telling campers the wide range of household chores his dog helps him accomplish on a daily basis.

Campers were thoroughly impressed by the dog's daily chore list that included turning on and off lights, getting items from the fridge and taking the laundry out of the dryer.

A demonstration of some of Garrison's more simple tricks like picking up keys or wallets had campers begging for more.

"It's great helping the kids learn and a really fun way to pay back the organization," Downs said.

Downs also said he really enjoys answering the kids hard-hitting questions like, whether or not Garrison gets to sit in the front seat of the car. Some campers also shared their own stories about their pets at home.

"It's interesting how animal-aware they already are. They all have interesting facts and stories about their experiences with animals," Iffert said.

On his way out the door

around the group, giving each kid a hand shake.

Throughout the week, each kid has plenty of opportunities to interact with a wide variety of animals.

"It's great to see campers interact with the animals. I think that's most of the kids' favorite part," Elise Glaser, one of the camp counselors, said.

One of the week's highlights is a visit to the Double J Riding Club.

"Double J really teaches them what it takes to care for a horse. They get a lot of hands-on experience grooming horses and even making them some cookies," Iffert said.

Campers will also take a trip to the Brookfield Zoo. At the zoo, they will visit the Discovery Center and get the chance to hold a snake. For the more cautious campers, there is also some time to play with a rabbit.

The camp travels to one more destination, the Mayslake Forest Preserve. During this excursion, campers have to answer animal trivia questions and dissect an owl pellet to solve a forest mystery.

"It's really funny watching the wide range of reactions



Bill Downs' service dog, Garrison, has plenty of extraordinary skills. Downs said his dog takes out the trash to a dumpster at his office every week.

kids have to activities like holding the snake or dissecting an owl pellet," Iffert said. "Some love it and others, who are initially a little shy, really warm up to it too. They just learn so much through interacting with live animals."

More than 120 students participated in one of the summer's six one-week camps. Iffert said she looks forward to organizing the

program in the future and hopes it will continue to grow.

The variety of different animals kids are exposed to helps her teach the campers an important lesson.

"It's about being aware that every type of animal needs care," Iffert continued. "My goal is to get out there and teach kids, families, that all species have different needs and requirements"



Throughout the week, campers like Lauren Patarikiewicz hear from different guest speakers on a variety of topics such as how to properly care for a pet and conservation and share their own experiences with animals.