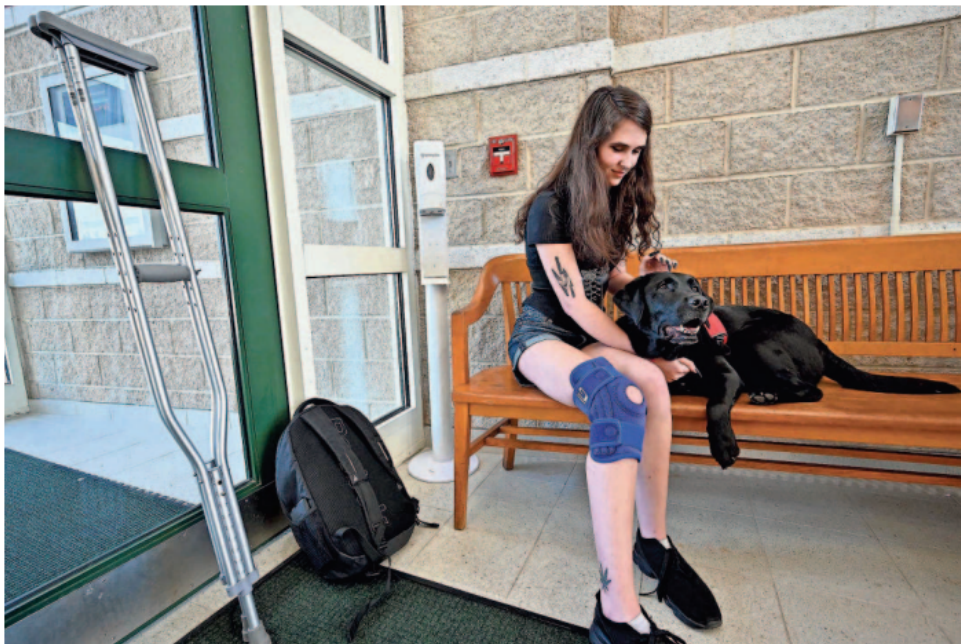


J.D. barks up right tree at Central Mass. school



NEADS dog J.D. gets a pat from Tantasqua Regional Senior High senior Alexis Buteau. ALLAN JUNG/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

Service dog loved at Tantasqua High

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Worcester Telegram & Gazette

USA TODAY NETWORK

STURBRIDGE – One of Tantasqua Regional Senior High School's most popular staff members is known for his ability to provide a comforting presence in times of distress – and for taking treats when he's a good boy.

It's J.D., a 5-year-old black lab who regularly walks around the school building and visits classrooms with as-

sistant principal Beth Johnson, his owner and handler.

"It has been a giant love affair between every staff member and student that J.D. has ever met," Johnson said. "He makes a world of difference for some kids – he really turns their day around and, for a lot of kids, he is the reason that they come to school or can get through the whole school day."

Whether it's the first thing in the morning as students arrive, a random walk through the building or lunch-

room, or popping into counseling sessions to help students, Johnson has been sure to make J.D. as accessible to students as possible throughout the day.

One of J.D.'s most frequent visitors – and, Johnson said, the president of his fan club – is Alexis Buteau, a senior.

Buteau said she typically makes it a point to see J.D. at least once per school day.

"He's very comforting and he knows all of these adorable tricks," Buteau said.

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NEADS dog J.D. gets attention from freshmen Dessa Demears, left, and Emma Haffly as the dog's owner, assistant principal Beth Johnson, looks on.

PHOTOS BY ALLAN JUNG/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

Service dogs

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"He's just a good distraction and good mind reset for the day."

She and her classmates were introduced to J.D. on the first day of school at an assembly for seniors, she said, and the excitement that they would be able to see him every day was immediate.

"He greeted everyone and let everyone pet him. He was so cute," Buteau said. Buteau, who hopes to work in a bakery after graduation, said she's thought about making cookies for J.D. soon, as a way of thanking him for supporting her, such as the other day when she was in a counselor's office.

"I was having a hard time, and I was crying a lot, and she [Johnson] walked by with J.D.," Buteau said. "He just laid down next to me and I started petting him and he gave me a little lick on the nose. It just gave me the biggest smile."

For Stephen Pope, one of Buteau's classmates, J.D.'s presence has significantly improved feelings about coming to school. "This is the happiest I've ever been at school," Pope said. "Having him here brightens my day. I would say he's

the best staff member by far."

Pope said it helps knowing J.D. is there to comfort him if he needed support. Johnson said students have begun to view J.D. as their pet as well, going out of their way to see him at some point in the day. "I try very hard never to call him my dog," Johnson said. "I try to refer to him as 'our' dog." The duo were matched in 2020, when Johnson became involved with NEADS World Class Service Dogs, a nonprofit that pairs dogs with handlers to meet different needs, such as service dogs for people with disabilities, or assistance for classrooms. "Unlike therapy dogs, which are typically household pets who work as a team with their owners to comfort others while visiting places like senior centers, schools, or libraries, NEADS assistance dogs are highly trained and receive extensive socialization in many environments," said Kara Milotte, manager of client services. "They will remain calm and steadfast in many situations and are trained in specific tasks that their human partners can incorporate into their work."

Johnson said she was inspired to begin looking into bringing a dog into school when she was working at Knox Trail Middle School in Spencer.



Tantasqua Regional Senior High School assistant principal Beth Johnson does her rounds with her NEADS dog J.D.

While working there, she saw the impact a therapy dog named Keeva – who was not a NEADS dog – had in helping students in distress.

“We had a lot of kids with trauma backgrounds that would get really upset. They might hide under tables, or they just weren’t able to be in class,” Johnson said. “I was literally sitting under a table with a student who was very upset and Keeva came in ... and came under the table, and the kid did a 180 and said, ‘I’ll go back to math if Keeva can come with.’”

“That experience, she said, planted the seeds to begin looking into NEADS where she would eventually be paired up with J.D., which was “love at first sight.” She received training and learned how to be a handler.

“He is just such an enthusiastic dog. He’s definitely got a little bit of a goofy side, and he’s a happy guy,” Johnson said. “I just remember thinking, ‘Good grief, if he’s lifted my mood this much in the first five minutes of meeting him, what’s he going to do when he’s in school for a whole year?’”

Before coming to Tantasqua this year, Johnson worked in Leicester High School, where J.D. got to meet his first group of students. His impact was felt almost immediately, she said.

“It takes .01 seconds to bond with a dog, and he becomes an important part of their day,” she said.

For Kaden Gillette, another senior at Tantasqua, seeing J.D. was like seeing an old friend – he previously attended Leicester Middle School.

“I didn’t see him much then, but when I saw him show up here it was a

great comfort,” Gillette said. “I always pet him whenever I see him now.”

“Whenever I see him, he’s always helping someone,” Gillette said. “I’m happy he helps my classmates and me.”

NEADS has assistance dogs in other schools in Central Massachusetts as well, including Maggie at Clinton Elementary School, Jonesy at Mill Pond School in Westborough, and M.K. at Worcester State University.

Kevin Fenlon, M.K.’s handler and assistant director of counseling services at Worcester State, said M.K. has made his job easier, helping build rapport with students. “It’s an easy way to open the conversation,” Fenlon said. “Dogs have a sort of quiet calmness, and just allows the space for students that feel comfortable, and I think for a lot of students who are residents, it reminds them a little bit of home.”

The idea of bringing a dog on campus to improve engagement with students went from an offhand comment to a serious endeavor in 2021, Fenlon said. He began researching NEADS and then got approval from leaders at the university.

Not long after, he was paired with M.K., who has since become very popular with students at Worcester State.

While students mainly interact with M.K. during individual counseling sessions with Fenlon, others have seen him around campus or at campus events, Fenlon said.

“I’ve seen his influence, not just on students, but on staff members, and on faculty members in meetings,” Fenlon said. “That’s important to me, as well. He’s here for the students, but he’s here for the community at large as well.”