

First guide dog in local schools aids autistic boy



Sean Stein, 6, walks with guide dog Bruster, and his mother Terry Stein, to an assembly at Marion Oaks Elementary School on Wednesday, March 9, 2011. Bruster helps Stein, who has autism, in his kindergarten class on a part-time basis. Kevin Christian, public relations officer for Marion County Public Schools, said Bruster is the first guide dog to ever be used in a public school in Marion County.

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Sean Stein introduced his guide dog Bruster to all the kindergarten classes at Marion Oaks Elementary during an assembly Wednesday.

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- [Bruster goes to school](#)

Sean, 6, has autism. Bruster, a standard poodle, is the first guide dog to be used in a Marion County public school, said schools spokesman Kevin Christian.

"Animals are the greatest resource you could give to an autistic child. There is so much compassion that an animal can give. The connection between a boy and a dog is very special. Eye contact with a dog is easier than with a human," said Sean's mother, Terry Stein.

Sean said his favorite thing about Bruster is taking care of him, and he likes it when Bruster lays his head on him.

Stein said Sean also has low muscle tone, or hypotonia. She has trained Bruster to stand beside or lay behind Sean in school to help support his back.

Principal Pattie Hornsby said she was surprised when she first heard of the plan because she had never been aware of a guide dog being used to help an autistic child.

"Now, he seems much more confident and walks around more proudly. He is able to function in a regular kindergarten class," Hornsby said.

Stein said although Bruster currently attends class with Sean part-time, the plan is to keep him with Sean all day.

Sean's father, Martin Stein, said one of their main goals in using a guide dog is to keep Sean in a typical classroom.

"It helps [autistic children] to achieve more by staying mainstream, and not being isolated and placed in a special needs class," he said.

Terry Stein said that before Bruster came along, Sean was unable to walk on shiny floors.

"He had a fear of drowning, which came from his depth perception of the shiny floors. But now they go anywhere they want to go. Sean doesn't even think about it, and there is no stress on his face when he walks into a store," she said.

She said because Sean can feel many sensations in the wind, he is tethered to Bruster at all times to keep him from running away and into the wind.

"He holds up his hand to the wind — it is something that his body feels, and it will distract him. We are also training Bruster to touch with his nose or paw when Sean gets excited," she said.

Bruster is trained four times a week to track Sean in case he does run away.

Bruster wears a handle attached to a vest that makes it easy for Sean to hold onto. The vest also serves as a reminder to his classmates that Bruster is working and to not pet him during class.

Terry Stein said they waited more than three and a half years to get a guide dog and contacted Highland Canine Training LLC after a dog with another nonprofit organization fell through.

She said after only six months, Bruster was ready and trained specifically for Sean's needs. She has taken over the training of Bruster, with hopes that someday Sean can be his trainer.

Martin Stein said while many nonprofits still maintain ownership of guide dogs, Bruster is officially theirs.

"Bruster has automatically become part of the family. We don't even look at him as a dog. He's more like a babysitter for Sean — he's right there for me," Terry Stein said.

She said they started Autism 4 Parents last July after realizing how badly parents of autistic children needed a support network.

"The diagnosis is a shock, and you go through a grieving process. Parents shouldn't have to travel the road that we did; it was very bumpy and difficult. Parents can feel the stress in connection to [a special needs] child, but a dog doesn't feel that stress," she said.

The cost of purchasing a guide dog can run anywhere from the price of Bruster, \$8,900, all the way up to \$35,000. The nonprofit Autism 4 Parents offers grants to purchase a guide dog through Bruster's Buddies 4 Autism. Information can be found at www.autism4parents.org.

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