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Four legged history buff becomes lifelong friend

By Meg Hibbert

You don't need a watch to know when Harry Hoyt's schoolbus is approaching the house at the corner of Market and Hawthorne.

All you have to do is watch Zipper.

The border collie leaps up from where he's waiting in the living room and starts yipping excitedly before his master comes through the front door from sixth grade at Andrew Lewis Middle School.

The boy-and-dog scene could be in just about any house in Salem, but there's a difference: Zipper is a St. Francis of Assisi Therapeutic Social Dog and Harry is autistic.

"Autism is a lifelong, neurobiological disorder which profoundly affects one's ability to communicate and socialize," explained Harry's mother, Hetty Hoyt, "and often involves severe sensory dysfunction.

"For an autistic child the world is a confusing and difficult place to navigate. Learning is a challenge and making and keeping friends is a tall order," she added.

Although in his St. Francis training Zipper learned basic obedience as well as how to open a door and pick up dropped objects, he's with the 13-year-old not to give that kind of help but companionship.

"One of our goals in asking for a St. Francis dog for Harry was to give him a reason to get out of the house into social situations and to get some exercise," explained Hetty.

Her son is uncomfortable meeting people and doing anything outside his regular routine, which frequently goes along with autism.

"When St. Francis of Assisi matched Zipper with Harry, they provided our child with a loyal, adoring, non-judgmental friend not to be found anywhere else; a companion who is always there for him, does not correct him, does not remind him to do his homework, does not order him to bed and seems to listen with utter fascination to Harry's lengthy discourses on United States' history, presidential facts and the precise layout of the mansion at Mount



Vernon."

Harry and Zipper are one of the first pairings in the Roanoke Valley of a service dog for an autistic person.

Boy and dog officially graduated in ceremonies Nov. 23. Zipper has been a member of the household since spring, though.

Zipper has already worked some magic in Harry's life, according to family members.

"Social situations are painful for Harry. He likes for me to anticipate people's questions and write him a script," his mother explained.

Now when mother, son and dog go walking, Zipper gives Harry a reason to have to interact with people.

"Harry takes Zipper on a minimum two-mile walk around the block after school faithfully every day," his mom explained. "We have our route: Hawthorne and around to Clay and back again. When I walk down Main Street with Harry, I cannot tell you how many people address my son."

They know him from school or from the dentist's office and other places, she said.

Because Harry is so high-functioning, many people don't realize he is autistic, his mother explained.

This is Harry's first year to ride a regular school bus. He started preschool at East Salem Elementary, then went to South Salem.

School officials made sure Harry would feel comfortable at the middle school by asking Stuart Maxey, an eighth-grader who lives nearby, to be Harry's mentor.

Stuart, who is also 13, explained why he agreed;

"The first time I met Harry I thought he was a really cool person," Stuart said, "and I wanted to be friends with him."

Stuart helps his friend by making sure he is on the bus from school, "and in making friends, trying to start out his day good, making sure no kids are mean to him and helping him with having someone to talk to," he explained.

Although Harry is in special classes most of the day and has an aide who works with him, he likes to be as much of a regular kid as possible, his family said. That's one reason he doesn't want to have Zipper at school with him.

"Harry chooses to have Zipper as a dog any boy could have," his mom added.

In addition to his regular walks with Zipper, Harry has embarked upon a new fitness routine.

"When Harry's brother, Alex, was home from Woodberry Forest boarding school in Orange over Thanksgiving, he started Harry on a running program, jogging four laps to a mile on the Roanoke College track," his mother explained.

She and Harry have continued the outings.

Harry does best when he follows a set routine.

In the afternoons when he gets off the school bus, Harry heads through the dining room into the kitchen, hangs his jacket on the back of a chair, slips off his tennis shoes and gets out a snack of cheese bread or juice.

Even though Zipper doesn't get people food, the almost-all black Border Collie sits expectantly at his master's feet, hoping against hope he'll get a morsel.

Afterwards, the three set out for their walk. If his mother has a visitor, Harry and Zipper retire to the parents' bedroom to absorb another episode of the History Channel.

One day last week Harry's friend, Jose - a Roanoke College student who works with him - came to say goodbye when he left for Christmas holidays.

Harry talked animatedly with Jose, gesturing and smiling.

But when another visitor asked him to delay their daily walk in order to pose for a picture with Zipper, Harry turned sullen and uncooperative.

"You're getting a vision into the window of autism," his mother remarked.

Harry isn't a demonstrative youngster, and at first, his parents weren't certain how much he was relating to Zipper.

Then came the day his mother overheard Harry talking about the family's recent visit to Mount Vernon. He's passionate about history, and the History Channel.

"He loves to hang out with his dad and look at history books," his mother explained. Harry insisted the family go all through Mount Vernon.

"He was explaining in minute detail what was on each floor of Mount Vernon," she said.

"Overhearing that made me realize there is a lot going on that you may not see."

At the same time Harry and Zipper graduated, 9-year-old Jake Heptinstall of Vinton, who is also autistic, graduated with Kobe.

His Australian Shepherd mix is also a Therapeutic Social Dog. Jake's parents, Sharon and Chris Heptinstall, credit Kobe with helping calm him.

Jake's type of autism is called Aspergers syndrome, and he's also been diagnosed as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

By law, Kobe and Zipper are allowed to go anywhere their young masters go.

"Every once in a while we'll put Zipper's St. Francis vest on and take him with us to Mack and Bob's and other places," his mother said.

"There's always that luxury of knowing that if Harry wants to take Zipper on an airplane, he can."

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