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Baldwin Park Unified Student Club Learns How Therapy Dogs, Play Can Ease Hospital Stress

BALDWIN PARK – Every time the big, black dog moved, the 50 students in Sierra Vista High School’s National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Club oohed and aahed as one.

That was just the point, as Gunny and his handler Elaine Jeche described during an Oct. 23 presentation on the soothing effects of therapy dogs.

“There’s a lot of stress in the hospital, and it’s not just the patients or their families. It’s the doctors and the nurses and the receptionists,” said Jeche, who volunteers through Therapy Dogs International. “Gunny’s job is to be petted.”

Jeche said she and Gunny – a 100-pound furry mountain of patience and calm – visit Kaiser Permanente twice a week.

“I go up to the surgical waiting room and it’s quiet,” Jeche said. “There’s no smiles on faces, no happiness. And, well, you wouldn’t be happy. And we go around and visit all the people and he sits on their feet and they pet him and the whole atmosphere changes.”

Jeche was joined at the NAMI Club gathering by Azusa Pacific University Assistant Professor Charity Vasquez, who talked about the role child psychologists play in helping children understand what goes on in hospitals.

“It’s not a normal environment,” she said. “It’s boring, it’s scary, it’s loud, it’s bright. So we do a lot of therapeutic intervention ... We help them understand what’s going on.”

Vasquez shared a table of toys and games that can educate children about what they can expect, including a doll with heart monitors, as well as distract them from the anxiety of hospital visits. Toys include bubble wands, I Spy books, doctor kids, syringes for painting and Play-Doh.

“There’s a science to playing with these toys,” she said. “This kind of play is really meaningful for these children.”

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Vasquez and Jeché also told the students about how to enter their fields – the education needed for psychology and preparation needed for therapy dog handling.

The talks offered a window into mental health tools for members of the club, the first high school NAMI club in East San Gabriel Valley. With 150 members, club members battle stereotypes that prevent those in need from obtaining critical services.

Mental health advocates estimate that one in five children and youths have mental health challenges, but only 20 percent of them receive care.

Marisol Rodríguez, NAMI vice president, said she feels mental health issues are as important as physical injuries.

“It’s something no one really notices or sees, so it’s often ignored. But it’s as important as your physical health,” said Rodríguez, who wants to become a teacher.

Paula Chen, the club’s secretary, said she joined the club to learn more about mental health issues after grappling with depression in middle school. She hopes to study applied psychology or cognitive science in college.

Previous training sessions with Kaiser Permanente Baldwin Park Medical Center showed students how to identify and understand mental health illnesses and how to find services.

“These students are breaking down barriers, for themselves and others,” Superintendent Dr. Froilan N. Mendoza said. “It’s incredibly brave and important to see them expanding the boundaries of their education even after the school day ends.”

PHOTOS

BPUSD_NAMI_1: Elaine Jeché and Gunny describe the soothing effects of therapy dogs during an Oct. 23 visit to Sierra Vista High School’s National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Club.

BPUSD_NAMI_2: Sierra Vista High School NAMI Club Vice President Marisol Rodríguez, left, and Secretary Paula Chen, pet Gunny, a therapy dog who visited their club on Oct. 23.

BPUSD_NAMI_3: Members of Sierra Vista High School’s NAMI Club gather around Gunny, a 100-pound therapy dog, after a presentation to the group on Oct. 23.

BPUSD_NAMI_4: Azusa Pacific University Assistant Professor Charity Vasquez talks about how child psychologists use dolls and toys to help children understand what goes on in hospitals.