



Therapy Dogs Guide Kids to Court

By Eddie Stephens, Esq., West Palm Beach, Fla.



General Magistrate Juliette Fanelli is a long time animal lover. A vegetarian, she also shares her life with res-cue dogs.

In her career as a general magistrate for Palm Beach County, she is always looking for a way to make court easier for children.

“Judge Alvarez reminded me I had a duty to effectuate change and help these children,” Fanelli mused.

The idea of mixing her love of dogs with her desire to help children sparked with Fanelli at the Dependency Summit in September 2011. She spoke to one of participants who went to a seminar in New York and Magistrate Fanelli heard of the correlation of child abuse with animal cruelty. “So, I did what anyone would: Google it.” Fanelli quipped. “At a break I spoke to Judge Alvarez and then DCF Chief Perry Borman.” “Judge Alvarez said you have my division, you have my permission.”

To turn idea into reality, Fanelli researched local therapy dogs association and sought assistance, finding



many, many organizations ready to volunteer.

Barbara Dawicke, Trial Court Administrator, helped Magistrate Fanelli overcome all obstacles involved in bringing dogs into the Courtroom. Eventually Judge Blanc got involved and approved the pilot program.

There are no funds to pay for dogs. This program is funded purely on volunteers and the desire to help children. Every volunteer is there on their own time, with a desire to help. “Everyone helps out even the Palm Beach County Sheriff’s deputies provide bones for the dogs” Fanelli said.

When asked about her contributions to this pilot program, Fanelli deflects the question; “Any change I have effectuated has been a result of Judge Alvarez’s inspiration”.

January 23, 2012 was the first day Orla came to Court. Orla, the friendly, sweet natured Golden Retriever was an instant hit.

“From the very beginning it just worked. Children were entranced with Orla. Orla introduces herself to children before Court so they are familiar with her, and Orla walks them into the Courtroom so they don’t

think it is an intimidating place. The first day, saw a total transformation in the most unreachable children.”

“It’s a really nice way for kids to interact with parents and siblings if they have not seen them in awhile. It is a nice buffer for them to have something else to talk to the kids about.”

After several months of the program, Magistrate Fanelli’s only regret? “We didn’t start this earlier.”



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