

'REALLY FUN THING TO DO'



TODD BERKEY/THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

Larry, a rescue dog from the Humane Society of Cambria County, is all smiles as he sits with St. Francis University students Autumn Baum (left) and Joel Godissart on Tuesday before a class on canine learning and behavior at the Loretto campus. Check out more photos online at www.TribDem.com.

Dogs, students learn from each other 'Real-life' study in St. Francis canine class

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LORETTO – St. Francis University students on Tuesday morning walked three shelter dogs between desks in a closed-off section of the campus library.

The activity was part of Shlomit Flaisher-Grinberg's class on canine learning and

behavior, which has been offered at the Loretto university for the past nine years.

The lesson of the day was dog-to-dog communication.

Adjunct professor and dog trainer Megan Mills guided the students through the training

– pointing out the dogs' physical cues and telling students how to keep the pooches focused.

Throughout the course, the students learn to care for the dogs, teach them good etiquette and study their behavior.

"They're getting trained and

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they're getting spoiled," joked Flaisher-Grinberg, an associate professor of psychology.

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This year, the group partnered with the Humane Society of Cambria County to get shelter dogs – Larry, Ambassador and Wanda.

Flaisher-Grinberg said that she and Mills have worked with other organizations in the past, but they always choose shelters because their dogs “actually need us.”

The idea to hold this class came from a previous psychology professor, but Flaisher-Grinberg took it over at the start of her tenure at St. Francis University.

Flaisher-Grinberg handles the coursework, while Mills provides instruction for the labs, such as Tuesday’s training session in the library.

“It’s real-life, hands-on learning,” Mills said.

Flaisher-Grinberg noted that the knowledge the students gain in class has a lot of value in the future.

According to the course description, students get hands-on training in applying the concepts of reinforcement, conditioning and behavioral analysis, while the dogs get a second chance at life and the goal of adoption.

Once they complete the course, the dogs earn an American Kennel Club Canine Good

Citizen certification, a diploma and a St. Francis University graduate collar tag during a special ceremony.

“All in all, it makes them much more adoptable,” said student Trinity Weimer, who is training Ambassador in a group with fellow zoology and aquarium science major Jordan Shank and physician assistant major Carissa Novotny.

Weimer said she took a prerequisite class that focused on shelter cats, and moving to this course was the next step in her schedule, adding that it was a “really fun thing to do.” She hopes to work with ambassador animals in the future, such as those that greet visitors at zoos.

So far, Shank said, the dogs have been good and the class offers great experience with animals. Novotny agreed, adding that she hopes to use her new know-how in her future career as a physician assistant, possibly with therapy dogs.

Once the spring semester is finished, the dogs will hopefully be adopted, but Flaisher-Grinberg said that in some cases, students have kept the canines for independent study, or the dogs stayed on campus for integration into other departments.

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