

# Kyler Laird's Therapy Dogs Breed COMFORT AND FAMILIARITY

"I wish I could skip class to be with the dogs every Tuesday."

At Saint Joseph's College, skipping class is not condoned. It is the kind of effect, though, that Kyler Laird's therapy dogs have had on students at SJC. For those who are unfamiliar with the concept of using dogs as a form of therapy, the reasoning behind it is very sound. When students arrive at college to begin their freshman year, it is not unusual for them to experience anxiety or stress from being away from home for the first time. By bringing in dogs for the students to interact with, Laird is providing students, many of whom have pets at home, the chance to experience the comfort and familiarity that home offers.

"The students look forward to seeing the dogs," said Laird, a Fellow of SJC. "There is research which shows that interacting with dogs can help lower blood pressure and stress levels. I have noticed that the students who visit are often smiling and chatting happily with one another."

The idea to use his own dogs to help students cope with various issues started at Purdue University. Laird was invited to a women's residence hall to give an evening presentation, and later he worked with them to provide "Dead Week Dogs," dead week referring to the week before finals.

"I saw there how much the dogs helped the students relax and interact with each other," said Laird. "Many of the students craved a 'dog fix' having left their dogs and other pets at home."

Laird then invited students to work with his dogs, who have all passed either the AKC Canine Good Citizen test or the Delta Society Pet Partners test, as part of the playgroups program he helped develop at a local kennel. He also made loaner dogs available to students to borrow for the day. However, Laird wanted to do something on a more regular basis, and he thought SJC would be the perfect place. He got in touch with Vice President of Institutional Advancement & Marketing **Dr. Maureen Egan '90** who directed him to Dean of Students & Director of Counseling **Dr. Leslie Frere**.

"Leslie was immediately supportive of my ideas, and she helped get the program started at a pace I would never expect at Purdue," said Laird.

By bringing the dogs in, Laird also hopes to encourage interaction among the students and raise awareness of the other services offered by the Johnson Health and Wellness Center. With about twenty students attending each session, Laird is accomplishing his goal. And for incoming freshmen who may think the dogs will not be back, don't

worry. Laird hopes to continue the program for years to come. As for those students who are skeptical of the idea of using dogs for therapy, Laird has some advice.

"Walk by the Johnson Health and Wellness Center when we're there," he began. "Incidentally, I was one of the skeptics when it came to the benefits of interacting with dogs. It all seemed a little 'fluffy' to me, but the research is there and people seem to enjoy it. You don't even have to come inside the room with the dogs. I welcome people to stand on the other side of the gate and explain to me why they are skeptical or why they may not even like dogs. For me, one of the biggest rewards of coming here is the opportunity to hear people's stories."

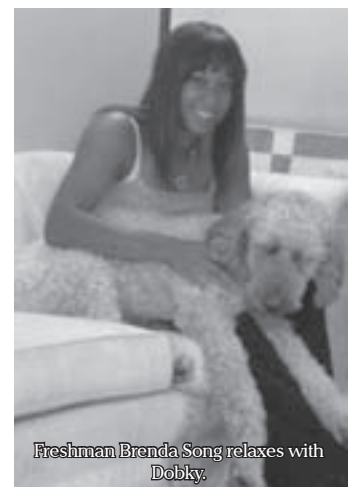
Laird's therapy dogs have undoubtedly grown popular on campus as they offer students the familiarity of home and relieve some of the stress and anxiety that arises from being on their own for the first time. Saint Joseph's College is commonly described as being just far enough away from home, and Kyler Laird has found a way to bring the two a little closer.



Juniors Leigh Sattler and Matt Harmon get acquainted with Kyler Laird's therapy dogs.



Dean of Students Leslie Frere spends some time with Buddy.



Freshman Brenda Song relaxes with Dobky.