

The Therapist at the End of the Leash

A diminutive fifth grade boy reluctantly raised himself up from his prone position alongside Vikahn. He had been stroking and hugging Vikahn for the last five minutes but now it was time to go to lunch. I asked him if he wanted a photo of the big guy to take with him and his response put everything in perspective for me. “No thank you, sir,” he replied and for the first time in a long time I was speechless. “I’ll *always* remember what he felt like,” he explained, “but a photo won’t ever last that long.”

Vikahn, our therapy dog affiliated with and certified by Therapy Dogs International (www.tdi-dog.org) had given hundreds of 4x6 photos to the children of the Newtown, Connecticut schools since the terrible tragedy in 2012, but this was another special moment that clarified how therapeutic his presence was for not only the students, but the staff as well.

We received the call out shortly after the crisis teams in Newtown decided where we were most needed. Since the schools were immediately closed down for the weeks proceeding what would have been the normal holiday vacation period we were asked to attend to the needs of the children and families seeking crisis counseling at the intermediate school.

I soon learned that the adults required just as much comforting as their children but weren’t as accomplished at hiding their feelings as their offspring and Vikahn wasn’t discriminatory with his love. A few minutes after we arrived in the school lobby he was surrounded by a throng of families that hovered around him waiting for their turn for Leo hugs and rubs.

The next few days we divided our attention between the counseling areas and the Newtown Youth Academy that opened its doors to the townspeople. TDI now had at least six teams of therapy dogs and handlers positioned throughout the NYA corridors that throughout the day resembled school hallways between classes. Families spread out amongst our dogs and I of course had to answer the obligatory questions about what breed Vikahn was and how much he ate each day.

The rare, quiet moments shed the most light on the pain people were feeling and how they were coping with their emotions. One of my most poignant memories was that of a twelve year old girl who embraced Vikahn with both arms and wouldn’t let go. She began to whisper in his ear and I overheard her murmur that she was beginning to feel warm again. Then she looked up at me and I understood what she meant before she said, “not that kind of warmth”.

When the schools reopened in January, we were part of a regular rotation of dog therapy teams that were welcomed with open arms at Reed Intermediate School. As a former educator I thought I was particularly sensitive to the needs of the teachers as they endeavored to keep a “business as usual” approach to the educational needs of the students. But the reality was that the school administration and staff were cautioned by visiting psychologists and therapists that nothing was more important than the stress relief that the dogs provided.

This appeared in the local Newtown paper: *“At Reed Intermediate School, where therapy dogs have been stationed every day since December, Principal Jay Smith was effusive in his praise. “You talk to parents, to kids, to any adults in the building, and it’s all remarkable,” said Mr Smith. “Youngsters you couldn’t get a smile out of would meet with the dogs and perk right up,” he said.*

The dogs give the children a sense of empowerment, as handlers allow the youngsters to hold the leashes or walk with them, or even through the enthusiasm generated by trading cards that keep the children in contact with the handlers and dogs.”

The trading cards became a hit with the children soon after some of the handlers started passing out “business cards” with each of our individual dog’s photos and a short bio. When the kids would ask me if I had a Vikahn card I temporarily disappointed them with a negative response, but then their expression would change as I added, “He wouldn’t fit on a card, so I have these instead!” That’s when I would pull out piles of Vikahn’s prints that soon became a huge delight.

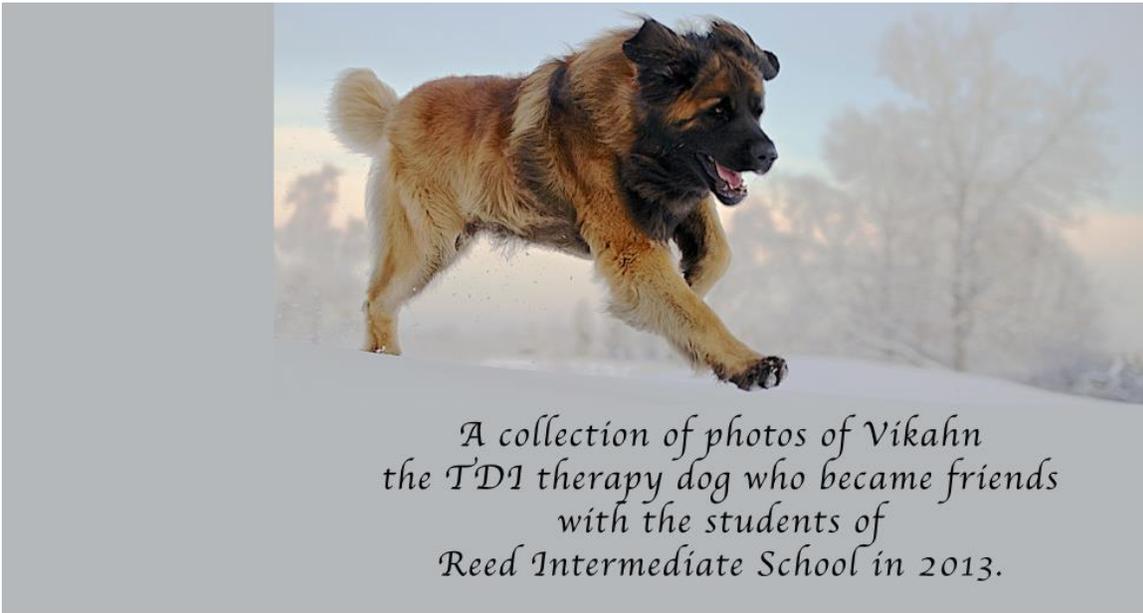
When parents would come to pick up the kids that weren’t bussed home at the end of the day I would begin to hear reports of where Vikahn’s photos ended up in their homes. More than a few refrigerators in Newtown sported his mug and then I started hearing about his photos tucked under the kids’ pillows and bedspreads.

It didn’t take long to realize the effect that Vikahn was having on the children and how much they looked forward to the days we were scheduled to visit. I began to hear from the kids that loved seeing him, but were sad when he wasn’t there. That’s when I had an idea of how to make him a little more of a permanent fixture at Reed Intermediate.

After seeing how much the children appreciated seeing pictures of Vikahn in all phases of his growth and development and experiencing the joys of being

a dog I came up with a plan that morphed into a hard covered book of Vikahn photos entitled, "Running to Reed".

Running To Reed



The book was presented to the students and staff of Reed Intermediate School and is a very popular item in the school library and now whenever the kids (or staff) have a case of Vikahn withdrawal all they have to do is ask the librarian for a dose...

It is now January, 2014 – it's been over a year and we are still enjoying bi-weekly visits to Newtown. The kids are excited about the news that Vikahn has become a father of fourteen and they're sure that at least one of the pups will happily follow in their pop's footsteps. I hope so too.

