

# Read Between the Paws

by Jenny Pavlovic

An Excerpt from *Love, Animals & Miracles*, by Dr. Bernie Siegel & Cynthia Hurn

A little girl jumps up and down when Chase enters the library. She read a story to Chase last month and wants to read to him again. She doesn't have a dog at home. With his back legs and rump up, Chase bows down and hugs the floor with his elbows, lowering his muzzle so it's not in the girl's face. He is repeating the same polite "let's play" greeting that he instinctively adopted on the first day he met this nervous child. She claps her hands.

"Look, Mommy, he's bowing!"

Chase remains calm while she keeps jumping with excitement. And when she settles down on the quilt, he snuggles in next to her and gives her his undivided attention as she reads a story to him.

Just learning to read, the girl easily becomes frustrated by new words. She's also been teased and bullied on the playground at school. I want to build her confidence, to let her know how beautiful and smart and wonderful she is, and to show her that encountering something unfamiliar, such as a new word, can be like discovering a treasure.

Our library visits were originally about helping kids learn to read. But Chase and I found we can also be an antidote to bullying, offering true friendship that cushions her in a world that sometimes feels unkind. Fifteen minutes of friendship and undivided attention not only builds the girl's confidence in reading but also makes a positive difference in her self-esteem. All the while, she is learning to love and be kind to dogs.

Chase is highly intuitive; he knows exactly what she needs. I realize that he knows just what I need too. He led me into this work. I sometimes wonder who's getting the most from our visits: the little girl, Chase, or me. Fifteen minutes pass quickly, and another child is waiting with book in hand. It's time to say goodbye until our next session. During the month between visits, I often think of the little girl, and I look for books that she might like to read. I wonder if Chase thinks about her too.

I call my mom, a teacher — now retired — who specialized in reading. I ask how to help the child with her stumbling blocks and frustration. I'm amazed at how much my mom knows and am grateful that she instilled in me a love of reading, a love for books so deep that I not only read them but write them too. This brings me closer to Mom. I don't have children of my own, but I remember sitting in Mom's lap while she read stories to me and, eventually, I read stories to her. At the library I've learned that I too love listening to kids read.

Chase came into my life after Hurricane Katrina. I had gone to Louisiana as a volunteer to care for rescued animals. If not for our common mission to help displaced animals who were lost in the hurricane, I never would have met Sarah, another volunteer, who lives a thousand miles from me. Sarah rescues animals in a poor area of rural Virginia. She listed a red heeler mix on her website after rescuing him from an angry man who threw him around, stuffed him into a tiny chicken crate, and was planning to shoot him for chasing sheep. When Sarah went to get him, the dog sat on her lap and shook for a couple of hours despite her soothing assurances that now he was safe and no one would ever abuse him again.

Sarah and I determined that this dog would likely be compatible with my Australian cattle dog, Bandit. With the adoption arranged, he then needed transport from Virginia to Wisconsin. Volunteer relay drivers stepped up to the plate, and a friend of Sarah's in Indiana put him up for a night while he was en route. I met the dog in Wisconsin and brought him home to Minnesota. He earned his new name — Chase — because that's what he most loved to play with Bandit.

Chase and Bandit were soon best buddies. In spite of coming from a violent and troubled past, all Chase *ever* had to give was love. His gentle nature and affection for people led us into meaningful, life-changing work. After we earned the therapy dog certification, we joined the reading program at the local library.

Surely it wasn't just chance that brought Chase into our lives, but a series of everyday miracles sprinkled along the path to Bandit and me. It seems this wonderful teacher in a fur coat was born to help children develop reading skills and to teach all of us about love. So many insignificant events led to that magical moment when Chase made his first bow to the nervous child and, in her delight, she lost her fear and began to jump up and down. If *dog* is truly *God* spelled backward, I think that was the day God winked at me.

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**Jenny Pavlovic** is the author of *The "Not Without My Dog" Resource & Record Book* and *8 State Hurricane Kate*. She lives in Middleton, WI. Visit her online at [www.8statekate.net](http://www.8statekate.net).

Retired surgeon **Bernie S. Siegel** speaks, writes, and runs support groups in his effort to empower patients. He lives in Woodbridge, CT. Visit him online at [www.BernieSiegelMD.com](http://www.BernieSiegelMD.com).

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