

4-H club opens up new world to kids

Best Friends aims to help disabled youths learn about dogs

By ANN BURCH
H-P Correspondent

BERRIEN SPRINGS — For 11-year-old Caleb Noonan of Benton Harbor, the Best Friends 4-H Club opened up a whole new world for the deaf youngster and brought him a new pal named Windy.

"This is his second year. It's been so good for him and rewarding," said Jan Noonan, Caleb's mother and interpreter. "This gives him a purpose and self-worth. He is in charge of the dog, and the dog has to obey him. He lives in a hearing world, and I think he feels left out sometimes."

The shy, sandy-haired boy became confident, however, when leading Sprockett, a Jack Russell terrier, through an obstacle course during the dog judging competition earlier this week at the Berrien County Youth Fair.

Sprockett and Caleb were paired together last year when Caleb joined the Best Friends 4-H Club. The club, which started in 1988, is designed to help disabled young people learn about dogs and dog handling.

The program is run on volunteer power, including the dogs, whose owners loan them for the six weeks of obedience, agility and showmanship training before the fair.

"Everybody learns," said Jane Evans, a coordinator of the club along with Linda Shannon-Chaillet. "We do anything that will help them (the youngsters) to succeed."

While Sprockett is not Caleb's dog, Caleb was recently given the terrier's mother, Windy, as his very own by Evans, who owned both dogs. Evans said choosing the right



Ann Burch / H-P correspondent

CALEB NOONAN, 11, of Benton Harbor runs Sprockett, a Jack Russell terrier, through the obstacle course, part of the dog judging competition this week at the Berrien County Youth Fair. Caleb is a member of the Best Friends 4-H Club. His mother and interpreter, Jan (in the blue dress), watches in the background.

dog for the youngster is important. That is why she gave Windy to Caleb.

"The growth that has taken place (with Caleb) is amazing," Evans said. "These are the things that you see that make this program worthwhile."

For 10-year-old Julia Devine, people and dogs are pretty much alike.

"Dogs are just like humans, only with four legs," said the St. Joseph girl, who was paired with Sonnie, a 4-year-old female chocolate Labrador. "I really like it. It is a good way to express yourself."

Julia said she learned about the "parts" of a dog. "They have elbows just like humans." She and Sonnie worked together. Julia learned how to respect Sonnie, and the Labrador taught Julia that sometimes you have to be patient when the dog decides it doesn't want to obey.

"I might win third place in obstacle because she wouldn't go up the teeter-totter," Julie said.

Because members of the club range in age from 6 to 25 and come with different abilities, team instructors help them during training and competition, making this a

bit different than other competitions.

This was the second year Donalee Watson has volunteered as a judge for the club's obstacle course competition. She has been a dog judge for many years, but working with the club has been one of the best things she has done.

"It is one of the most rewarding things I have ever done," Watson said.

"It's very hard to judge some of the kids, and I feel bad about taking points off. But it sure feels good to watch them when they finish. They are all smiles."