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Kindergarteners and first-graders from Columbine Christian School paid a visit to the La Plata County Humane Society recently to give donations and play with some puppies. The Humane Society is offering local kids a chance to get up close and personal with the shelter animals this summer with a series of kids summer camps aimed at 11 - 15 year olds./Photo by Jennaye Derge

Camping with canines

La Plata County Humane Society hosts summer Kids Kamp

by Jen Reeder

Summer camp has gone to the dogs – at least at the La Plata County Humane Society. For the third year in a row, LPCHS is offering two summer kids camps, four days of hand-on experience with animals at the shelter.

“We’re pretty excited about it,” said Chris Nelson, LPCHS shelter director. “It’s a good way for the kids to get an education about what we do here at the shelter and how to be responsible pet owners. Going forward, they are the future. They are the ones that are going to take care of these homeless animals when I retire, so that’s a good thing.”

The LPCHS Kids Kamp is the brainchild of Ken Hibbard, LPCHS education and outreach coordinator. The “retired” Bayfield Middle School teacher said the camp pairs two of his passions.

“Animals and kids – it’s two awesome things,” Hibbard said. “They’re a good match.”

Kids Kamp is a co-ed camp for youth ages 11-15 and is limited to 12 campers (every session sells out fairly quickly). On the first day of camp, attendees are split into three groups. One group spends the day with the shelter’s dog trainer, teaching the dogs basic obedience skills like sit, down and stay while walking the dogs. They also play games related to dog training.

The second group crosses the parking lot to PetSense and watches a groomer at work on a dog, then applies their new knowledge to shelter dogs. Hibbard says it’s fun for the kids and dogs, and also helps the animals look more presentable for adoption, particularly when they are strays.

“Sometimes it’s a dog’s first bath, but nine times out of 10, they love it,” he said.

The third group spends the day getting a tour of the shelter and “what goes on behind the scenes,” Hibbard said. They spend about an hour with animal protection officers learning about their job, then watch veterinarian Heather Perkins perform spay and neuter operations – if they want to.

“The whole time that surgery’s going on, our vet tech and veterinarian are just giving tons of information about the benefits of spay and neuter and why it’s important,” Hibbard said.

Afterward, he makes sure the kids play with puppies, kittens and/or special-needs dogs, whether deaf, blind, three-legged or just fearful and needing personal attention.

The fourth and final day of the camp, all of the campers head to Wolfwood Refuge in Ignacio, a nonprofit rescue sanctuary for wolves and wolf-dogs. There they take a two-hour tour, meet the wolves and learn about wolf communication, life in the wild, the differences between wolves and dogs. They are also told why wolves need to be left in the wild – “they don’t make good pets,” according to Wolfwood founder Paula Watson.

“We tell them that they’re going to grow up and make a difference someday, so we’re hoping they vote to share the planet with wild animals and keep wild space for them, and keep pets as our companions,” Watson said. “We’re a working rescue, so the first thing we do is save animal lives. But the second thing we do is education ... the more kids learn about animals, the more compassion they learn. It’s really good for them.”

Stella Botha, an 11-year-old Hesperus resident, attended the Kids Kamp in 2014 and had such a good time that she now volunteers with LPCHS and will return as an assistant at the camp this year.

“It’s super fun. It’s really cool to watch everything that they do,” she said, adding that Hibbard “is super funny and nice.”

She said it feels good to help dogs and cats get adopted, like a Rottweiler named Jillian she and the campers took on walks. She watched kittens get spayed and is interested in possibly becoming a veterinarian.

Botha, who first learned about the shelter when her family adopted a puppy named Rocko, said she hopes people will adopt pets from the LPCHS because of the “friendly” animals waiting to find forever homes.

“They are really, really good dogs and cats,” she said.

Other former campers have told Hibbard they love “everything” about the camp, and some have said they want to become veterinarians or dog trainers in the future. But his main motivation is just getting kids involved with the Humane Society and having fun.

“For me, that’s why I do it. Turning kids onto it and letting them see the Humane Society’s not a sad place to be. These animals have personalities and need love and care, and if you can’t adopt one, make toys for us, or sell cupcakes.”

Hibbard was touched when a group of kindergartners recently donated a cup full of pennies and nickels totaling \$56.45. He has created a number of programs for children, such as “Read to a Dog,” in which he takes adoptable dogs into schools to boost children’s literacy, and outreach with at-risk youth. Recently, he was inspired watching the interaction between a teen from the Phoenix Alternative Learning Center and a terrified dog named Navajo, who was “scared to death to come out of her kennel.”

“Boy, they just connected ... He turned to his teacher and said, ‘When can I come back?’” Hibbard recalled. “The humans need the animals and the animals need the humans.”

Clearly, Hibbard loves sharing his work with kids at the Humane Society.

“I’m a happy camper – I get to do this,” he said. “It’s good stuff.”

The June La Plata County Humane Society Kids Kamp is full, but a second one will take place in August – dates are still being finalized. The price is \$100 and camp runs from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. For more information, visit <http://lpchumanesociety.org/>.

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