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NIU wants comfort dogs back on anniversary of shootings

Campus wants dogs back on anniversary of attack

By Carolyn Starks

Tribune reporter

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When classes resumed after the slayings at [Northern Illinois University](#), anxious students showed up at the campus counseling office seeking to talk to someone who was a good listener -- someone calm, someone furry.

They wanted to see the dogs.

In the aftermath of the Feb. 14 shooting by gunman Steven Kazmierczak, comfort came to the shaken DeKalb campus from an unusually calm pack of four-legged therapists whose mission was to find people who wanted to pet them.

The weeklong presence of these comfort dogs has been so missed at NIU that campus officials are working to bring them back on the first anniversary of the shooting -- and earlier, if possible.

"In many instances, they gave to students things we couldn't give them as mental health professionals," said Elizabeth Garcia, a counselor at NIU whose office coordinated the dogs' daily schedule. "Some students didn't want to talk to counselors but talking to the dogs made them feel better. I saw people sitting on the floor with them, talking to them like they were humans."

Twelve dogs were from Animal Assisted Crisis Response, an elite group of therapy dogs trained to bring emotional rescue after a disaster or crisis. Some of the dogs were used in New York after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and at [Virginia Tech](#) after the campus shootings there.



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At NIU, comfort dogs rode city buses, went to basketball games, sat unnerved at noisy dorm parties and mingled inside pizza parlors. A campus religious group also brought dogs from Extra Mile Ministries to greet students.

Campus officials said the dogs drew crowds, and there were constant requests from students and faculty members who asked to talk to them or pet them.

On the first day back to classes after the shooting, the dogs were brought to the newsroom of the Northern Star, the college newspaper.

"Everybody stopped what they were doing and ran to the dogs," said senior Eric Rood. "It's not going to make anything go away but there's something comforting about petting a dog."

One of those seeking comfort was faculty member Rebekah Kohli, a program coordinator in Women's Studies, who was nervous when she returned to the campus Feb. 19. She said she had memories of wounded students running into her building, bloodied and seeking cover.

Kohli tried deep breathing, but found herself smiling less and looking over her shoulder too often. One morning, she looked outside and smiled at the comfort dogs. "Why not," she figured, and asked if one could come to her office.

"Tikva came up to my knee and she's got this puff of hair -- I mean really thick fur -- that just sticks up all over her body," Kohli said. "I petted her and she rolled over on her back. It brought joy and a sense of calm in the midst of a day."

Tikva, a keeshond with a plush coat of silver and black fur, stayed for an hour that day. When the dogs left the campus, Kohli taped a photo of the 8-year-old dog to her computer.

"She continues to bring me a smile," Kohli said.

Cindy Ehlers founded the organization, which is based in Eugene, Ore., shortly after she and her dog responded to a school shooting in 1998 close to her home.

She realized that most regular therapy dogs could not withstand the stress of crisis situations. They would need special training.

Her organization certifies comfort dogs throughout the nation. NIU officials said the dogs came in contact with about 16,000 people on campus.

"Not many dogs could withstand hundreds of students petting them all day long," Ehlers said. "The dogs have to be comfortable with emotional reactions from people -- the crying or those who are withdrawn -- those extremes that regular therapy dogs may or may not encounter."

Ehlers said several students who were in Cole Hall when the shooting occurred wept when they

approached the dogs. One student hugged Tikva and told the dog what happened that morning, Ehlers said.

Zadok, an Akita, walked around campus giving kisses to students who knelt beside her. A Dalmatian was a favorite because it was sweet. The male students liked Lionel, a hound dog and Labrador retriever mix.

Ehlers said she and Tikva are more than willing to come back, because they too were comforted.

"We've never been treated so nicely," Ehlers said. "The things they said -- they really touched me."

cstarks@tribune.com

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