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Therapy dogs visit Rivier University in Nashua for finals week

By *TINA FORBES*

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Zolah, a Rhodesian ridgeback, walked into a group of 10 Rivier students waiting for her in a quiet corner of Rivier University's Regina Library on Monday, walking a slow lap around the lounge and acknowledging each person with a calm gaze, sniff or lick while students eagerly pet her copper brown fur.

To help manage the stress of finals week, Rivier University organized time for 11 therapy dogs to visit students between Dec. 7 and 10. Therapy dogs are dogs that, along with their handlers, volunteer at places such as schools, hospitals and nursing homes to help comfort people.

The dogs typically visit hospitals and hospice centers, and many have never been to a college campus before visiting Rivier, according to Pam Richardson, the library's circulation coordinator.

Richardson said the handlers are excited to be introducing their dogs to this type of work at the school and that there has been a lot of student interest this year.

"There are a few students whose goal it is to see every dog we have," she said. The volume of students has dropped slightly, but the week's not over yet. "Our all-time high was 80 people. The highest this year is 52, but it's still popular," she said.

Rivier junior Gianna Buscone visited the dogs twice and said they have helped relieve stress.

"I feel more calm after seeing them," Buscone said. While there wasn't any one thing in particular, "just being with them, seeing them and petting them" can help, she said.

Richardson was the person who first invited the therapy dogs to the library two years ago.

"I knew therapy dogs helped students ... they help learning disabled students, they help people with dyslexia learn better. They help with the stress of finals," she said.

Richardson pitched the idea to her director, and the program began with a visit from a spaniel named Bella and her 13-year-old owner, Anna. "And from there, it's grown to 11 handlers this year," she said.

After taking a final exam, sophomore Brittani Garza visited Bear, a Burmese mountain dog who visited the library Tuesday.

"I liked it a lot. It gives you a happy feeling ... rather than completely focusing on finals,"

Garza said.

There will be 16 visits by the dogs and their handlers. They will typically hang around for an hour and a half each time, as it seems to be the maximum time before the dogs begin to seem tired, according to Richardson. The dogs this year represent a variety of breeds, including a golden retriever, a yellow Labrador retriever, a Newfoundland and an English springer spaniel.

Zolah and her owner and handler, Marilyn Bachman, traveled to the Nashua campus from their home in Amherst. Zolah routinely visits and comforts hospice homes and is registered with [Therapy Dogs International](#).

It's her third time coming to Rivier.

"I call her Lioness Zolah," Bachman said. She said the breed originated in South Africa, where the dogs were used in packs to hunt lions to protect livestock.

The organizations responsible for therapy dog training and certification include Pet Partners, Leash on Life and Tufts Paws for People.

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