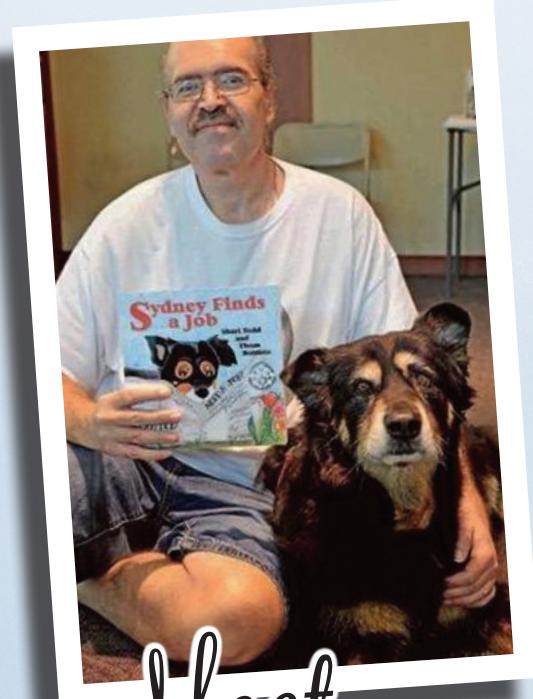


BUTLER CHAIN

ISLEWORTH • KEENE'S POINTE • LAKE BUTLER SOUND • N. BAY • S. BAY

BAY HILL + ENCLAVES • CYPRESS POINT, ISLE, SHORES & THE RESERVE

Living



Meet
Thom
Battistò



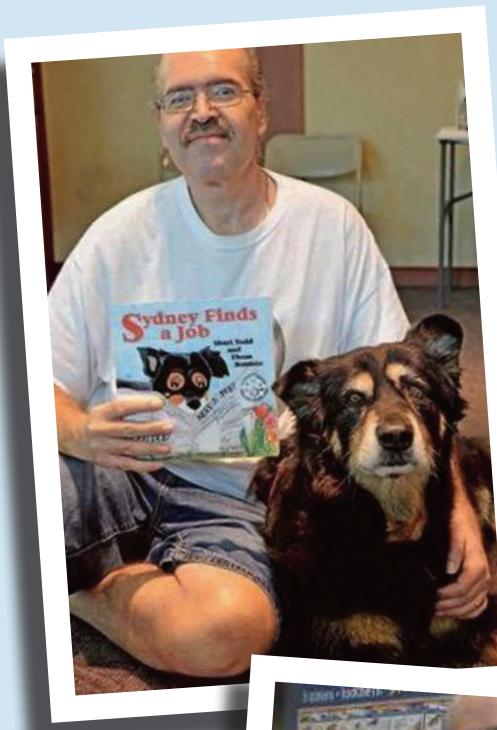
Giving Back
to Central Florida



Best Version Media®

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FEATURE STORY



(Below) Thom and Toby listening to a student read.



Meet Thom Battisto Giving Back to Central Florida

By Kristin Sabol

Reading is an essential and fundamental skill necessary for everyday living and basic interactions. It allows one to communicate freely, expand one's knowledge, and express personal thoughts and opinions. Not everyone develops this basic skill, though, and many adults and children struggle with learning how to read early on. Whether it's stress, anxiety, or a learning disability, one organization in Central Florida is looking to change all of that.

Read to Sydney is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a mission to help children with and without disabilities learn to read. Established in 2011, the charity pairs together children with certified therapy dogs to practice reading in a stress-free environment and make it more fun.

"Read to Sydney started in South Lake County over eight years ago and has since expanded to the entire Central Florida area," said Thom Battisto, founder of Read to Sydney. "The organization was started because I was one of those children who grew up with reading challenges and a learning disability. When I saw first hand all the children and young adults with the same issues, I knew I had to step up and help them any way that I could."

This personal understanding and Thom's experience with reading serves as the foundation and underlying drive of his organization, an organization that is steadily growing and gaining in popularity. "Thanks to a recent story on Access Hollywood, the exposure has dramatically increased the number of requests for school, library, and other public appearances. At each of these appearances, children are provided free books and are invited to read to a certified therapy dog." The children love the opportunity to interact with playful dogs, and parents and teachers appreciate the unique way kids are getting a chance to practice this necessary skill.

Reading and spending time with pets or animals is proven to be healthy and fun. It can be a useful tool that helps manage the symptoms of stress and anxiety, especially amongst children developing a new skillset. "When a child reads to a certified therapy dog, there is no judgment or anxiety; the child experiences only patience and quiet acceptance, not to mention, it is more fun to read to a furry friend." This combination creates the perfect environment for children to practice in, and the dogs bring a unique and exciting element to a task that a child might not otherwise be excited about completing. Reading to therapy dogs helps elevate self-esteem, develops reading skills, and reinforces learning in a fun way. It additionally provides comfort, relieves anxiety, encourages speech, and teaches positive social interactions.

Thom has always had a love for animals and spent much of his time volunteering at animal shelters. He witnessed the simple impact interactions with animals had on children and adults. He also recognized how the actual act of reading to a therapy dog helped prepare children for the future. "You need to be able to read and communicate, to be able to work and go on to college and become whatever you wish to do in life. Too many young adults fall through the cracks while being educated because they can not read."

With the help of the registered therapy dogs, Thom and his furry friends visit area schools and libraries where children have the opportunity to read aloud to the animals.

The organization started with two therapy dogs, Sydney and Toby, the original Read to Sydney therapy dogs. Sydney and Toby completed a 30-day rigorous training program consisting of nursing home and school visits to develop specific training skills and ensure proper interactions. Requirements to be a registered training dog include: having a pleasant demeanor, listening well, demonstrating patience, and bringing smiles to everyone they meet. Bailey is the newest member of Read to Sydney and is a therapy dog in training. "She is currently going through a much longer training program and should be registered and fully insured within the next few months."

These therapy dogs are trained to be patient, gentle, and nonjudgmental, allowing children to feel more comfortable reading aloud to them, which helps the students



not only learn to read, but it further develops their confidence in comprehension and speaking. This confidence pours into other areas of their life, including public speaking, interacting, and formulating thoughts and opinions. This simple formula is helping Read to Sydney grow and thrive in the community. "Read to Sydney was one of the first organizations that offered reading assistance with a therapy dog in school and library settings. Our organization also donates new books during our school visits and at local venues."

Read to Sydney currently offers a few different programs for the Central Florida community:

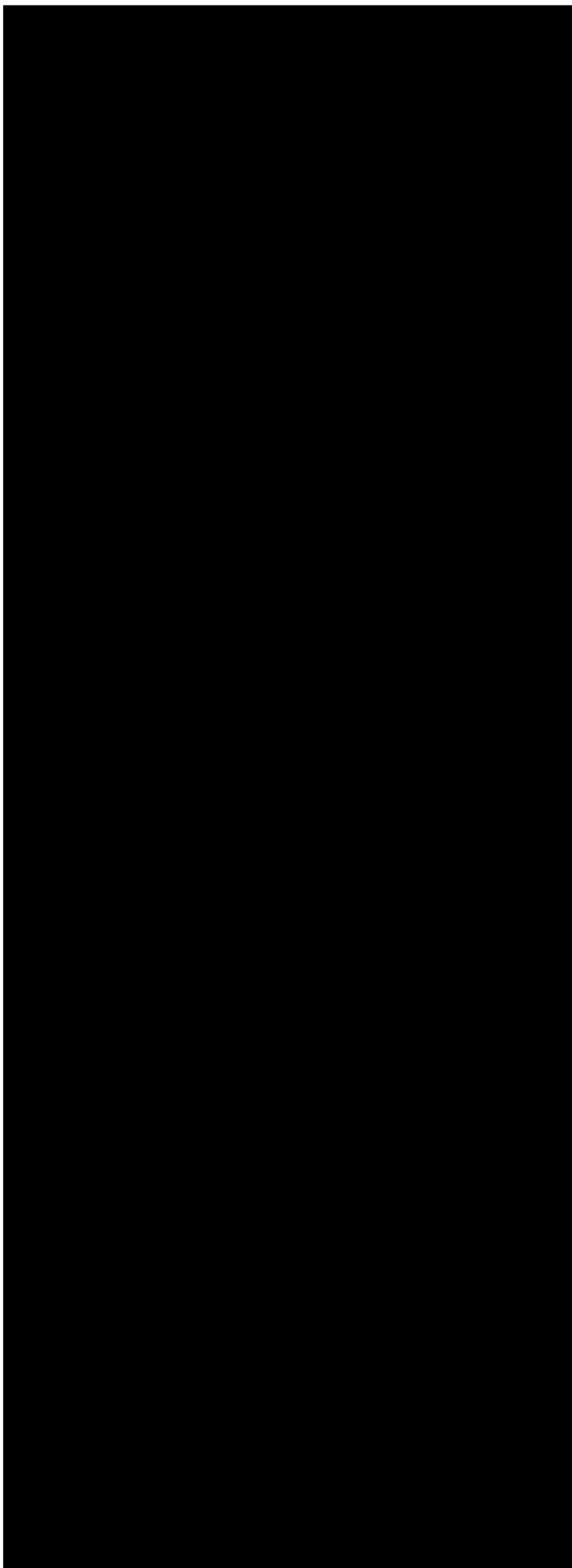
School Visits- the school visits allow children the chance to interact with the therapy dogs in their classroom while listening to a story. Every child is given a book of their own to keep during the visit, or a book donation is made to the classroom library.

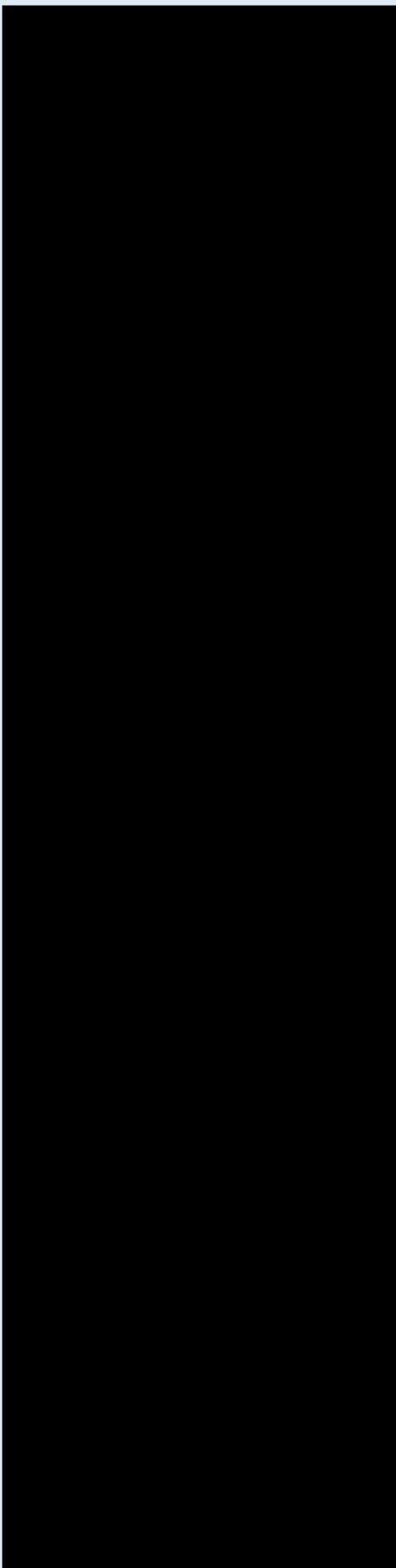
Library Visits- Monthly library visits provide opportunities for any child to read to the dogs. The programs are open to all children and encourage reading practice in a different setting.

For a short time, there was a third component, Sydney's Reading and Learning Center. The Learning Center was located in the West Oaks Mall and was a place where children could visit and read to therapy dogs, as well as participate in special events designed to be inclusive for all. The center was ADA compliant and autism-friendly but unfortunately closed. "The center was located inside of the Mall, and the children would come into our ADA compatible center where they were greeted by one of Sydney's Friends. Children and young adults of all ages pick out a book and read to one of our therapy dogs. It was very special. The child then picked out a book to take home with them to commemorate the positive experience. Several times a year, the Reading and Learning Center would host free parties." Thom hopes to add this integral piece back into the organization again in the near future.

As Read to Sydney continues to expand, Thom is looking to add a final element to their program. "We are currently funding for a bookmobile," explained Thom. "To better serve these requests, it has long been a goal to purchase a bookmobile with the cargo space needed to accommodate larger quantities of books, as well as safe transport for the therapy dogs. Seed money for this fund has already been established thanks to the generosity of several benefactors who believe in and support our mission."

Read to Sydney has received excellent recognition and achievements since its establishment. In addition to the monthly library visits, the nonprofit partners with 40+ school visits to give children the chance to interact with therapy dogs and receive a new book. Last year, Read to Sydney gave over 3,500

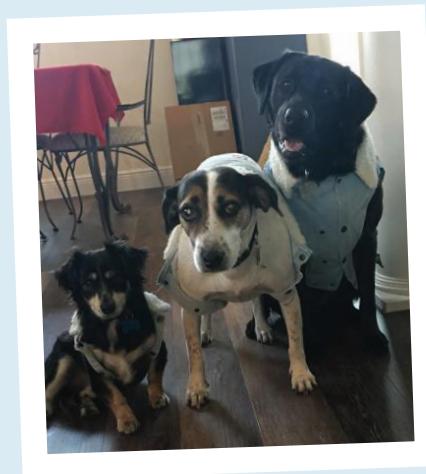




Toby is one of the therapy dogs helping children learn to read.

books to children, and 2020 is already on track to easily exceed that number. A dependable vehicle with ample cargo space is a necessity for continued growth. "We would be able to reach to more children with the bookmobile, and we would be able to attend more functions throughout the community." Read to Sydney has additionally been recognized with Awards for Outstanding Community Service from the South Lake Chamber of Commerce and Kiwanis of Clermont.

This positive growth and recognition have allowed for Thom to include monthly nursing home visits during residents' parties. Not part of the official program, but a fun addition! The nursing home visits allow the elderly and staff to interact with the dogs. "Science has proven that petting a dog (or cat) lowers blood pressure and reduces anxiety." Both the residents and employees look forward to these visits!



While Central Florida boasts many great charities that support the local community, it is the combination of animals and



children working together that makes Read to Sydney unique. "I think it's my personal experiences with a learning disorder and reading issues that make this organization thrive. And my love of animals. I understand, and I truly enjoy working with children and young adults. Working with children and man's best friend truly brings a smile to all the children and young adults we work with."

A Central Florida resident for over 23 years, Thom and his therapy dogs can often be seen around town visiting his favorite stores and locations. "I enjoy bringing the dogs while I visit the Farmer Markets and outdoor venues in the area. I try to visit the local restaurants and shops whenever I can."

Read To Sydney is thriving because of the support from area businesses and patrons. There are many ways to help support this organization. "We are always in need of new and gently used books to hand out to the children during our reading events." For information on donations, volunteering, or special events, visit the Read to Sydney FaceBook page and website www.readtosydney.org.

F.L.A.G. OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

BY KRISTIN SABOL

Connected by a love of food and a desire to serve their community, Jay Hoffman and David Linn are looking to honor the first responders of Orlando and support the local restaurant community.

F.L.A.G. of Central Florida was established on April 1st, 2020, in response to COVID-19. It is a grassroots organization that originated in New Jersey and sparked numerous chapters across the nation, including Orlando. F.L.A.G. uses donations from local businesses and the community to feed local Fire, Police, and Hospital units while utilizing local restaurants and catering companies.

"This started when Dave called me after speaking to his sister in New Jersey, who is friends with the woman who started F.L.A.G., Liz Bernich. Dave's sister described what they were doing in their little New Jersey town, and he said: 'we need to do this here.' By the end of that day, March 31st, we'd spoken to Liz on the phone, and the next morning, April 1st, we launched."

David agrees, "I couldn't wait to get started. I am passionate about this organization because, during these hard times, this was an opportunity for the community to come together and not only feed our front-line heroes, but to help save our local restaurants, in my opinion, it was a win-win."

As of May 15th, the organization has delivered over 2100 meals, paid \$12,000 back to 15 different local restaurants, and raised just over \$13,000 through their Facebook page and word of mouth.



"The biggest accomplishment has been, in my opinion, delivering healthy meals to our first responders while supporting 15 local restaurants. The reactions from both the first responders and the restaurants have been amazing. They're so appreciative that people are thinking of them and providing them with great meals, and the restaurants obviously couldn't be happier to have big orders during a time when they were suffering."

Both men have culinary backgrounds and a passion for food. David has experience as a former chef and food truck owner, while Jay has a family culinary history. "In addition to Dave's food chops with the food truck and culinary school, I am the son and grandson of caterers and was furloughed from a local restaurant group where I was managing a special project. So both of us loved the secondary benefit to F.L.A.G.- helping local restaurants. We could have just delivered pizza or fast food every day, but the chance to support local restaurants and deliver good, healthy food, was a win-win," said Hoffman. Linn agrees, "I have a passion for local mom and pop restaurants, and whatever I could do to support them during these times was important to me."

As the organization is so new, the future is bright but uncertain. "Who knows what the local future holds; however, F.L.A.G. as a national organization is starting to adapt to other missions as COVID-19 starts to slow, we are assessing other community needs."

For additional information, please visit the F.L.A.G. (Front-Line Appreciation Group) of the Central Florida Facebook page.

Pet Corner

By Kristin Sabol

Cute, cuddly, and a whole lot of fun! We love our furry friends as much as they love us, but did you know owning a pet provides numerous health benefits as well? Relieving stress, promoting activity, and creating feelings of positivity are just a few of the amazing benefits our companions offer. Check out this month's collection of Windermere Pets!



SAY HELLO TO DOTS!

Dots is two years old and weighs only 2.1 pounds! She doesn't like to bark but makes little growling sounds instead. She loves to play with toys, and her favorite toy is the small rubber bounce balls from the little arcade machines in restaurants.

~Submitted by the Dixons



MEET TIGER!

Tiger is a super-snuggly kitten who loves to play with a little toy mouse filled with catnip! He goes crazy whenever he sees it!

~Submitted by the Wolman Family



SOPHIE!

This is Sophie, and she is almost two months old. This loveable kitten loves to play and run around. She loves people and is very independent already. She likes to play with her dangling purple toy- and any socks she gets a hold of. When she's tired, she is super cuddly and likes to sleep on my chest or shoulders."

~Submitted by Rachel B



POKEY

"This is my dog Pokey, and he is almost 11! He loves to bask in the sun and lay in his blankets on his couch."

~Submitted by Zoey Z

MEET SUGAR

"This is my puppy, Sugar! She's only three months old!! She loves sleeping but also loves eating shoes!!"

~Submitted by Delaney Reilly





TOBY!

Check out this handsome pup, Toby! "Toby is a 6-year-old Yorkie who acts more cat-like than a dog. He will not fetch anything unless it's covered in peanut butter! Even though he loves me, his real master is food!"

~Submitted by Kayra F.



MEET BENTLEY!

This playful and funloving pup turns one on June 17th. He's an Australian Labradoodle. He loves chasing lizards on the back patio, and he loves snuggling with his human brother and sister.

~submitted by the Moody family

Do you have a pet you would like to share?

Nominate your pet, or a friend's and be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact Kristin Sabol

at ksabol@bestversionmedia.com to submit!