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THE FORUM COMMUNITY NEWS

Tender loving canines: Eagles' Haven training therapy dogs to help heal after Parkland school shooting

By **SCOTT LUXOR**
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Eagles' Haven is partnering with a local Certified Therapy Dog program to make their services available to those affected by the Parkland school shooting. Alan Levine, founder of the dog therapy group, works with his dog Sophie, right, and Benny in the Eagles' Haven office in Coral Springs. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

With the four-year anniversary of the Parkland school shooting Feb. 14, the lingering effects of trauma on the victims' families, friends and school personnel have a lasting imprint.

Dogs have been used for therapeutic purposes for years and recognized as helpful to humans since the 19th century. Therapy dogs are often seen assisting people in social situations. Conditions like PTSD and anxiety have affected a number of people in the wake of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. That's where man's best friend comes in.

Before Parkland, therapy dogs were used to help in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012. So the idea has roots in helping families and students to cope with similar situations.

Eagles' Haven in Coral Springs is a therapy organization created the year following the events at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. After the shooting, the **Children's Services Council of Broward County** found that there was a need for therapy services in the area. They chose **JAFCO** to develop a program just for that purpose. The organization, which has the mission to care for abused, neglected and at-risk children as well as those with developmental disabilities, got the idea to create a community wellness center for those impacted, which they named Eagles' Haven.

Eagles' Haven Assistant Director Halle Solomon has been with the organization since its creation in 2019.

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“Our CEO at JAFCO came up with the idea of training other people's dogs to be therapy dogs in order to give back to the community,” Solomon said. “We connected with Alan Levine and his **Certified Therapy Dog** organization. He is the one who leads the group and then trains about six dogs per session, which is about 10 weeks long.”



Halle Solomon, assistant director of Eagles' Haven, poses with her therapy dog, Benny, who is a regular fixture in the Coral Springs office. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

According to Solomon, the dog certification is therapeutic in nature. While the classes are done in-house during the sessions at their office in Coral Springs, most of the work is done at clients' homes. The clients include families of victims and even educators at MSD.

“We have former Marjory Stoneman Douglas teachers who want to bring their dogs to the school or they just want their dog to be a therapy dog,” Solomon said. “We’ve had victims’ families, including injured survivors’ families bring their dogs in. Most people love dogs and dogs bring comfort to people’s lives. And that’s really what we see in the class.”

Solomon said they don’t become service dogs but [American Kennel Club Certified Therapy Dogs](#), so they have to pass a test. The owner has to do the exam along with the dogs. Afterward, they get a certificate and they’re able to bring their dog along with them to different events.

The dog whisperer

Alan Levine, the founder of Certified Therapy Dog program working with Eagles’ Haven, found his calling after a life-threatening health issue caused him to rethink his life purpose. He’s been doing dog therapy work for a decade.

“I had a life-threatening issue in my history that was never diagnosed and is usually fatal,” he said. “But I survived the crisis when I was in my early 50s. That left me wondering why I got a second chance. I began searching for that purpose. Then, just by happenstance, we got a dog. We named her Sophie and I looked at it as she found me.”

Levine said having the goldendoodle in his life began to make a difference for him.



Alan Levine, founder of the dog therapy group, poses with his goldendoodle Sophie, right, and Benny, the dog owned by Eagles' Haven Assistant Director Halle Solomon. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“Sophie brought me full circle,” he said. “Through my interaction with her, I found growth. And the more I put myself out in the community, I found people who wanted to connect with me.”

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Levine met a woman who helped him develop his ideas about the therapy dog approach in his life.

“I got Sophie into various training programs, one of which was pioneered by a woman who did therapy dog work,” he said. “Over the years, we worked very closely together before she passed away. At that point, I said to myself that I really wanted to continue the therapy approach.”

Levine has a business background, so he decided to create his own organization. The approach is AKC recommended, licensed and insured. Although he is working with Eagles' Haven now, he also does work with other partners.

“We have a hospice program and we go to numerous assisted living facilities,” he said. “We go to elementary schools, especially [Title 1 schools](#), which have a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. We also work with children’s hospitals since the kids connect so well with the dogs.”

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Levine originally got connected with Eagles’ Haven through one of his clients who knew about JAFCO and said that they would love this style of therapy, which they did, and they adopted Levine’s work into their wellness program.

“We do about a 90-minute class,” Levine said. “It’s a very comprehensive program, where people bring in their mostly untrained dog. We don’t ask much as a starting point for the canines. Then it is up to the individual as far as how quickly they want to advance to the program and do the work.”

Levine’s goal for each client that comes through Eagles’ Haven is for a transformation to occur through their interaction with their pups. The magic, he says, comes from the nature of what dogs are in people’s lives.

“Dogs really are empaths,” he said. “The dogs do all the work. There really is a permission that the dogs give the people to explore their innate kindness to others. There is so much emotional weight and things that will want to make us implode. Dogs provide an outlet where we can give ourselves and be kind to others.”

A client’s experience

Sarah Lerner has been a teacher at Marjory Stoneman Douglas since 2014. She was strongly impacted by the shooting and has had to deal with anxiety, trauma and PTSD since the day of the tragedy.

“I found out about Eagles’ Haven since they opened in March of 2019,” she said. “I immediately became their biggest fan. When I found out about the therapy dog training, I reached out immediately to sign up.”

Lerner got her mini Schnauzer named Ruby in 2020. She said that she grew up with dogs, but her husband didn’t, so it took a while to convince him. But Ruby has proven to be key to her recovery process.

“Ruby has been the best addition to my family,” Lerner said. “She’s so sweet and loving. She curls up next to you and just let’s you love her.”

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She said that she has nothing but good things to say about the experience she has had with Eagles' Haven.

“Eagles' Haven has done so much for those of us who were at MSD on that day in 2018,” she said. “To offer classes that allow us to give back has been tremendous. I hope that Ruby can bring others a fraction of the joy she's given me.”

A focused approach

Other than the dog therapy program, Eagles' Haven has an overall wellness program that works both with those who were directly affected by the Parkland shooting as well as those in the community who feel they were indirectly affected by the tragedy.

“Eagles' Haven is a wellness center for the entire community,” Solomon said. “We actually have an outreach coordinator whose role is to go into the community and find out what the community needs and what they want from our program.”



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The organization has family strengthening services seven days a week. Walk-ins are available for adults and children. There are safety assessments, crisis management and family therapy sessions. Solomon said that they help families get connected to different services that they didn't know that they could get help from even outside of their own organization.

“What makes us really different is that we don't offer the therapy on-site,” Solomon said. “We do crisis management, which is therapeutic. This style de-stigmatizes the idea of mental health support. So we don't look at things from the angle of mental health, we really look at things from the perspective of wellness.”

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The wellness classes are offered for free because their funding source supports Eagles' Haven. Some of their offerings include kickboxing, yoga and art classes.

“Our mission is that if you leave here feeling even an ounce better than you did an hour before you came in,

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then we did our job here,” Solomon said.

Eagles’ Haven is at 5655 Coral Ridge Drive in The Shoppes at Heron Lakes in Coral Springs.

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