



Students at Northpoint Charter School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, gather around Izze for their morning pets.

Mohawk-Sporting Mutt Brings Calm to Stressed Albuquerque Students

By Devon Hubbard Sorlie, COTD editor

When students at an Albuquerque, New Mexico high school are feeling a bit stressed, they will seek out their favorite stress-reliever – Izze. Sporting a scraggly mohawk and milky eyes that come with blindness, the nearly 14-year-old Chihuahua, terrier and poodle mix is a favorite among the students, who stop in at Donna Gallegos' office for a quick cuddle with Izze between classes at Northpoint Charter School. For Donna, a school social worker, the small dog is more than a pet; she is a partner in fostering resilience and tranquility in young minds.

"Children are very different now due to COVID," Donna said. "The pandemic has caused a lot of anxiety and depression. The students struggle every single day getting out of their homes into a different environment. For them, making the transition from home to school has been very stressful."

As a therapy dog through the Warm Hearts Network, Izze comes with Donna to Northpoint Charter once or twice a week. Izze's reputation for snuggling spread to the adjacent Renaissance Academy (grades 4-8), and some of those students will also pop in for a quick pet and marvel over Izze's wiry and distinctive hairdo. "The students

look forward to seeing her and ask for her, popping in to say 'I need Izze right now.' When she is here, there will be a crowd of students hovering around her, and you can just see the stress leave their minds and bodies," Donna said. "While I work solely with high school students, all of the students in the building know and love her."

For students struggling with anger, cuddling with Izze helps them calm down. "She's cute and fluffy and soft, all which helps change their mindset and ease their anger," Donna said.

Izze's impact isn't only emotional; she has also become a symbol of resilience. Three weeks after being diagnosed with diabetes at age 10, Izze lost her sight. Donna got a bumper harness for Izze to wear as she learned to navigate the house. After exhibiting signs of depression, Donna took her to an ophthalmologist for cataract surgery. "She was able to see for another two years, but started to go blind again,

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which is common in dogs that are predisposed to that,” Donna said. “But she was able to learn the house and the steps and yard. She runs outside and around the yard. She no longer needs the bumper harness. When I take her with me to work, she’s so comfortable and is not stressed about being in a different environment.”

Donna learned about the Warm Hearts Network through a speech and language pathologist colleague at work who also has two therapy dogs through Warm Hearts, a not-for-profit organization that started after three women who worked at the Los Lunas Training School, a residential facility for adults with developmental disabilities, began bringing their well-mannered dogs to work with the residents. In 1990, these women registered as teams with their dogs through the Pet Partners program and began to recruit additional members. The greater Albuquerque/Los Lunas/Belen chapter was called the Warm Hearts Network, and it became its own legal organization in 2013. WHN has a working volunteer board of directors with experience in business, healthcare, disability, dog training and handling, animal assisted activities, animal assisted therapy, assistance dogs and more.

“I always knew Izze would make a great therapy dog, I just never knew how to go forward with it,” Donna said. “An appointment for an assessment was scheduled, and it was just a neat experience. It was a wonderful, kind group of dog-loving people.”

Izze was asked to perform a variety of commands, such as sit, stay, and walk on a leash. She also had to walk past a bowl of cheese and obey the ‘leave it’ command. Another challenge was remaining calm while a young man in a wheelchair took her for a spin around the room. The biggest test was having a German Shepherd Dog walk through the room to see how Izze would react. “She was calm about everything,” Donna said. “Everyone was so positive and amazed by her.” Typically, handlers leave the room while judges discuss the assessment results, but Donna was informed that Izze passed the assessment immediately after it concluded.

“It really was the most special thing to watch that sweet dog test,” Paula Willis, the president of the Warm Hearts Network said. “I know that in all the years I’ve been with Warm Hearts, we have never tested a dog with that kind of disability. The dog is completely blind, but she did a better job than some of our seeing dogs. I think she is going to make a big impact at the places she visits and will make an amazing difference in our community.”

Izze is eager to put on her therapy dog vest and patch that states: Pet Me, I’m a Therapy Dog. “Izze wears her vest very proudly,” Donna said. “She gets so excited when she knows the vest is going on. She runs to the door and waits to go to the car. She seems to know when it is Thursday...she doesn’t behave that way on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.”

Ironically, Izze’s biggest hurdle to becoming a therapy dog was convincing Donna to keep her after her son brought home an odd-looking puppy with scraggly hair. “We already had three other dogs, so I tried to find her another home,” Donna explained. “But Izze showed me how incredibly smart she is by learning obedience commands and tricks very quickly. She was showing me how amazing she is. I always knew I needed to do something with her, and then I heard about Warm Hearts. I just wish I had done it sooner. But even at the age of nearly 14, Izze puts a lot of smiles on the faces of children.”



Izze at work.



Despite her blindness, Izze enjoys going out and bringing smiles to students with her scraggly mohawk.