

## Volunteer Corner: Mali brings smiles to readers of all ages

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Mali finds a book.

Volunteers come in all shapes and sizes, including fluffy and cuddly! Mali and her therapy team partner Barb are part of the Read to a Dog program at the Joyner-Green Valley Library. Twice a month, Mali sits and listens to children who are interested in reading to her in a judgment-free zone. She also brings many smiles to older patrons who remember the joys former pets brought to their hearts.

Mali was adopted by Barb from the Marin Humane Society in California. At that time, Barb was working at a school and Mali often joined her at various school events. Barb saw how much children loved Mali and after seeing a team of Reading Dogs visit her school, she knew that was what she wanted, too.

Becoming a therapy team required Barb and Mali to take training and pass a certification test. Barb trained on how to evaluate Mali's behavior and surroundings, becoming an expert in how to handle Mali in situations where her therapy needs would occur. Meanwhile, Mali learned good manners when interacting with people—becoming a Zen master.

When they were ready, Barb took Mali to her first certification test. Mali took a look at the primary tester and growled. The man told Barb that Mali would never be a therapy dog. Barb was devastated. After moving to Connecticut, Barb tried again to have Mali certified, but once again, Mali growled at the instructor.

After moving to Green Valley in March of 2021, Barb looked for programs to help Mali become a reading dog and learned about Sunshine Therapy Animals in Tucson. For the third certification test, Mali let her sweet charm shine, and she passed the test with



Barb and Mali love bringing smiles to others.

flying colors. After completing three required observation outings to an assisted living facility, a memory care unit and a kindergarten classroom, Barb and Mali knew they wanted to work with children.

When children read to Mali, they have her undivided rapt attention. Mali listens without judgment and sees how as the children settle in and become more comfortable, their self-confidence and reading skills improve. Kids become more excited about reading practice when they have a cute dog sharing their time together. Mali and Barb also teach the children the proper etiquette and safety skills around dogs.

Together, they also volunteer at a couple of local schools where they continually develop relationships with children. A kindergarten class at St. Michael's School in Tucson has a mailbox for Mali where she receives notes and drawings from the class. As a treat, Barb shares stickers and a trading card with kids after they read with quotes such as: "I met Mali – she thinks I'm one smart cookie!" "Mali says, "Great job reading!" and "Mali says "You've got this – keep it up!" The team also volunteers at Sopori Elementary School in Amado with the second-grade class helping four children a week improve their reading skills.

If you are interested in being a Read to a Dog team with your pet, check out these resources for more information:

Sunshine Therapy Animals: <https://lapansunshinefoundation.org/about-sunshine-therapy-animals/>

Alliance of Therapy Dogs: <https://www.therapydogsa.org/volunteer>

BARK (Books Animals & Reading Kids): <https://therapyanimals.org/>

Contact the Green Valley Sahuarita Volunteer Clearinghouse at [gvsvolunteering.org](http://gvsvolunteering.org) or call 520-625-5966, Ext. 600.



Barb and Mali read with a student at St. Michael's School.  
Aaron Gould