

Talented dog hails from Plainwell

BY PHYLLIS ROSE

Special to Hometown Gazette

GALESBURG — Student behavior at Galesburg-Augusta Intermediate School went to the dog — as in Toula, a border collie voted America's Most Talented Pet in an online contest sponsored by Petco.

The fourth- and fifth-graders were challenged to earn at least 2,500 tickets for good behavior in a three-week period, Principal Martha Hymes said. If they reached that goal, they would be rewarded with a visit from Toula.

The 183 students earned 2,786 good-behavior tickets, which were given out by any adult in the building who observed the behavior, Hymes said. The acronym from the school's motto, RAMS, is used to help students remember the rules: Respect yourself; achieve more; manage your behavior and think; and safety first.

"The kids were so excited when I announced that they had won the assembly," she said. "This is the time of year when there's new material in the classroom, and we've had so many inside recesses. This assembly came at the right time."

Waiting for the assembly to begin, the students watched everything Toula did as she and her owner and trainer Christine Mahaney, of Plainwell, prepared for the program.

"Toula loves kids," Mahaney told the students seated on the floor in the gymnasium. "She may come up and give you a kiss. I just want to warn you."

Mahaney adopted Toula from the animal shelter when she was 6 weeks old, and since then, she and the 4-year-old collie have



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Toula, America's Most Talented Pet, sits with her owner, Christine Mahaney.

been a team, she said.

"Toula enjoys working with me as a team the most," Mahaney told the students before showing them the various behaviors Toula has been trained to do.

Toula opens up a cooler and gets out a bottle of water for Mahaney, picks up toys and puts them in a toy box, gets Mahaney a tissue when she sneezes, and gets her a blanket and helps her cover up with it.

In fact, Toula knows between 35 to 40 behaviors.

"This takes a lot of time and a lot of work," Mahaney said. "But because we work hard, we get positive results."

There's a lot of laughter and applause as Toula searches through the crowd to find her favorite toy, a tennis ball. The children don't mind that Toula's tail swipes across their faces. They simply close their eyes

ONLINE VIDEO

To see the video that made the Plainwell dog famous, visit mlive.com/kzgazette. Click on Community Extra, then Hometown North to find the link.



and giggle.

Toula and Mahaney have been doing personal appearances since Toula was named America's Most Talented Pet last August. The road to that honor began when they performed live at the Petco Store in Kalamazoo, Mahaney said.

Because of that win, they then submitted a video to Petco and they were among the 12 finalists.

America got to vote online, and Toula won. In November, Toula flew to Los Angeles — celebrity status, in the seat next to Mahaney. In Los Angeles, they did a photo shoot that will be part of Petco's national ad campaign, probably in July, Mahaney said.

The honor has opened up opportunities for Mahaney, one of which is training a dog for a company in Los Angeles, she said. She got the dog at 12 weeks and will train him for about a year before he's sent back to Los Angeles to become a dog actor. Toula herself may have some opportunities to perform in films and commercials.

In real life, Mahaney is a paralegal, but outside of that and working with Toula, she also has fostered 13 border collies.

"I couldn't do that without Toula," she said. "She helps with the socialization. She's good about opening up her home to other dogs."