Duke: Meet Pocantico’s New Therapeutic Support Dog

Duke, an American Staffordshire terrier mix, was 4 months old when Mario Suarez and his family found him at the North Shore Animal League America shelter in Nassau County and decided to make him their own.

Seven years later, Duke is getting ready to start as the newest member of the Pocantico Hills School staff. His start date is expected to be sometime soon.

Duke is a great dog who is up to the task, said Mr. Suarez, Therapeutic Support Center teacher. In early November, he received the two American Kennel Club certifications necessary to qualify as a therapeutic support animal. He successfully completed the Canine Good Citizen and Therapy Dog programs.

“He’s a little mush,” Mr. Suarez said. “You start petting him and he just falls over onto his back.”

The Pocantico Hills School Foundation provided funding to bring Duke into the school as a therapeutic care dog. The grant has covered the training he needed for his certifications and expenses associated with his being at the school five days a week. The organization’s Swan Lake Walk this fall was a fundraiser for Duke.

“A lot of schools have had success with this for years,” said parent Lauren Amsterdam, foundation co-president.

Research has found that having therapy dogs in school settings can reduce students’ stress, anxiety and negative feelings, and boost their energy and wellness.

Superintendent Richard Calkins, who loves dogs, said he is looking forward to welcoming Duke to Pocantico. “We’re very excited to have Duke join our staff,” he said.

Children who participated in the Swan Lake Walk said they are happy Duke will be spending time at school.

Pocantico Chorus Performs with Renowned Classical Violinist

Students in the seventh- and eighth-grade chorus shared a stage on Nov. 8 with renowned classical violinist Alexander Markov.

They took part in the second half of Mr. Markov’s concert at Norwalk Concert Hall in Connecticut, where he debuted five new rock compositions he wrote. The 43 Pocantico students sang with choruses from two high schools in Fairfield County, Connecticut.

The Pocantico chorus began practicing for the concert in September, and Mr. Markov visited the school several times in the weeks leading up to the performance to check on their progress and give them tips.

“It was just a really great experience. It was very different compared to the concerts that we have here,” seventh-grader Timothy D. said. “It was really cool to have the opportunity to go and perform.”

Mr. Markov, who made his solo debut at Carnegie Hall when he was 16, comes from a talented musical family. His parents, Albert and Marina Markov, are also virtuoso violinists.

For the first half of the concert, he and his parents played masterpieces from Antonio Vivaldi, George Frideric Handel and other composers.

The second half of the performance was dedicated to rock ‘n’ roll, a genre the violinist has been passionate about since moving to the United States from Moscow as a teenager. A rock band, orchestra and the young singers backed up Mr. Markov, who played a gold electric violin. Dylan Wissing, who has performed with Alicia Keys and Drake, played drums. Musician Tommy Champion played bass. Pocantico parent Heike Doerr was the pianist in the back-up band, and her son, seventh-grader Ares E., also played piano during that part of the concert.

Alexander Markov has performed as a soloist with some of the world’s most celebrated conductors and orchestras. Bella P., another seventh-grader, said members of the chorus found Mr. Markov a little intimidating when they first met.

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SUPPORT DOG, continues on page 4
Longtime Pocantico Hills bus driver Phyllis Benjamin has one daughter, who is in her 30s, and dozens of “babies.”

The latter are what she calls the boys and girls she drives back and forth to school, sports competitions and field trips. As a driver for 31 years, many of them at Pocantico, some of the parents she greets at bus stops once rode with her as students. Children and adults all know her golden rule: You respect me; I respect you.

“I love kids,” said Ms. Benjamin, whom some students call Aunt Phyllis. “You have to love kids to be a bus driver.”

The district’s 18 bus drivers and monitors and 11 part-time bus monitors play a critical role in keeping children secure and making the district run well, Superintendent Richard Calkins said.

“They keep kids safe. That’s the No. 1 thing they do,” he said. “And they’re just amazing women and men who are committed to the kids.”

The school’s custodians work full time and driving a school bus is part of their job. Other drivers work part time but have more than one job at the school. Driver Owen Williams, for example, is also a playground monitor.

“It’s kind of a team effort, like everything else at Pocantico,” said district Treasurer Jane Anastasi, who does the bus routing and parent communications.

A typical day for the drivers starts around 6 a.m. They drive students to the feeder high schools first, and then do a second run for children in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. There are multiple bus runs in the afternoon, with buses picking up students at dismissal and later for after-school activities and sports. The district also transports students to private schools and special education placements.

“It’s a tough job. It requires a lot of concentration, a lot of flexibility and a lot of patience,” Ms. Anastasi said. “We have a lot of good people who really care about their kids and they care about the families. Everybody knows everybody.”

Hugo DeLeon, a driver, custodian and assistant to Director of Facilities Donald Booth, is instrumental in keeping transportation moving in spite of a shortage of drivers, she said.

Some children call him grandpa; others call him Mr. Jose.

Some of the youngest kids cry at the beginning of the school year because being on a school bus is new to them, said Mr. Zamora, who has been with the district since 2006. “I try to do the best I can and they like me because I try to understand them,” he said.

Adiel Medel, who started at Pocantico in 2014, said transporting dozens of students is a heavy responsibility. “If we have 50 kids on the bus, that’s 50 lives right there,” he said.

Custodian Fernando Ferrera, who has been at Pocantico for 20 years, said that while he and his co-workers have many other responsibilities at the school, transporting children is the top priority.

The district owns nine 66-passenger buses, 12 vans and one handicapped-accessible vehicle, said Mr. Booth, who has been director of facilities at Pocantico for three years.

“These guys have the best relationships with the students that I’ve ever seen as far as mentoring, as far as their responsibility to the students, and I’ve been in this field for 25 years,” he said of his staff. “They all know them by name. They relate to the students, they talk to the students, and that’s every one of these guys.”

The bus monitors are also very involved with students. Sammy Castro, who retired from the New York City Police Department, has been a monitor for about a year.

“I’m thankful that I’m able to get up every morning and do something positive,” he said. “I love working with kids. I have three boys that went here. Now I get to see a little bit of what they went through.”

Nancy Jones, the monitor on a pre-kindergarten through grade 3 bus, is also an aide for third-grade teacher Kerry Papa. She has been with the district for seven years.

“I love every minute of it,” she said of being a monitor. “It’s fun to be the first person they see in the morning. It’s rewarding to me.”
Pocantico Hills Students Harvest Vegetables and Make Fall Soup

In addition to nachos for lunch on Oct. 17, the Pocantico community sampled harvest soup, a delicious concoction of carrots, squash, beans, potatoes, rosemary and other vegetables and herbs, many of which were hand-picked by children.

Children in the younger grades picked the vegetables Oct. 15 and 16 under the direction of custodian and master gardener Jose Zamora. They worked with Chef Kassie Keehn to peel and mince garlic, and peel the carrots and squash. Parents chopped onions and other vegetables for the soup.

Some students helped create carrot-top pesto and garlands made out of marigolds, zinnias and corn leaves. Sixth- and seventh-graders in Family and Consumer Sciences classes collected cilantro, lemon balm, rosemary and other herbs to make herb butter.

Parents helped serve the soup during lunch periods, adding elbow noodles for children who wanted them. They served focaccia bread from the Rockland Bakery in Nanuet with the pesto and herb butter.

In addition to picking fresh vegetables, children harvested seeds to plant in next year’s garden. Teaching assistant Susan Regan, an avid gardener, guided children as they pushed beans out of dried pods to plant next year. They also dug out sunflower seeds from dried blooms and scooped out the inards of the squash.

Marco K., who is in fourth grade, ate a few squash seeds as he extracted them, getting some of the pulp on his face. “They taste like pumpkin seeds,” he said.

Second-grader John Carlo Tortoso had fun picking green beans in the garden with Mr. Zamora. “Can I eat it?” he asked the gardener. “Yes, but first collect five to six beans for the soup,” Mr. Zamora responded, cautioning John Carlo to be gentle as he pulled them off the vines.

Chef Kassie instructed children how to make a crack at the top of a head of garlic to help break it apart. She showed them how to roll the cloves in a silicone sleeve to peel them. She then demonstrated how to grind or slice the garlic in a press.

As she ground up garlic, second-grader Niina H. talked about how she does not like the vegetable. “My dad likes garlic. He forces me to eat it because it’s healthy,” she said. “He also makes me eat squash and zucchini.”

Sixth-grader Ciara B. picked herbs from the garden for the herb butter during her FACS class. The Harvest Soup Festival is a unique Pocantico event, she said.

“IT’s really festive for fall. Most schools don’t do this,” she said.

Marco also gave the soup a thumbs-up. “It’s really good,” he said.

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New Hires, Staff Changes

Welcome to new staff members who have joined us in recent months, and to educators who have taken on new roles this year.

- Marina Lombardo, who teaches third grade. She previously taught fifth grade.
- Angela Ilardi, who teaches fifth-grade social studies & ELA. She previously was a teaching assistant.
- Angel Richard, who teaches physical education.
- Maia Hood, who is a teaching assistant for kindergarten.
- Susan Regan, who is a teaching assistant for grade 4.
- Hazel Wisdom, who is a floating teaching assistant.
- Edward Sosa, who is a full-time 10-month bus driver.
- Daniel Alfaro, who is a full-time 10-month bus driver.
- Jeannine Harris, who is the special education secretary.
- Kristin Ripka, who is an assistant cook in the cafeteria.

Hot Breakfast Now Available Twice a Week

The cafeteria began offering a hot breakfast this month on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The new food items are egg and cheese sandwiches; whole grain waffles; egg, cheese and potato breakfast tacos; brown sugar and cinnamon oatmeal; egg and cheese bagel sandwiches; and whole grain French toast sticks.

Students and staff can purchase breakfast menu items à la carte or as a complete reimbursable meal that includes a grain, fruit/vegetable and milk. The student reimbursable meal is $1.50, and the meal cost for adults is $2.50 plus tax.

The hot breakfast twice a week is in addition to the existing School Breakfast Program of a daily continental breakfast that offers whole grain cereals, whole grain muffins, low-fat yogurt, whole grain bagels, fresh fruit and milk.

For more information, contact Kassie Keehn in the cafeteria at 631-2440, ext. 116, or kkeehn@pocanticohills.org.
Children Commune with Nature during Swan Lake Walk

Students identified trees, learned about macroinvertebrates, spotted frogs and turtles and took part in other educational activities at Rockefeller State Park Preserve Oct. 4.

They were participating in the Pocantico Hills School Foundation’s Swan Lake Walk. The event was a fundraiser for a therapeutic care dog at the school. The foundation provides grants for innovative programs that are beyond the school’s budget.

The foundation worked with the park’s naturalists to create 10 educational stations around the lake, which volunteers staffed. At one table, children saw the skull and antlers of a white-tailed deer, fur from a black bear, American robin nests and other artifacts. Another table had local stones and fossils.

At the maple station, children did leaf and wood rubbings and saw how sap is collected. One of the highlights was a chance to taste a maple-flavored jellybean. “I want these jellybeans for breakfast, lunch and dinner,” one student said.

During their walk, children learned about different types of plants that grow at the preserve, including goldenrod and ragweed. They also had a chance to identify native trees, such as oak, beech and tulip poplar.

Nearly 50 Students Recognized As “Super Summer Readers”

Congratulations to the 46 students who participated in the “Super Summer Reader” program!

They read a total of 696 books over the summer, with an average of 19 per child. The students kept a reading log and submitted it in September, said library media specialist Anne Price-Gordon, who has run the program for many years.

Ms. Price-Gordon held mini-parties this fall for children who participated. The celebration for first- and second-grade super readers took place Oct. 17 in the library. They each received a certificate and some Halloween Oreos as a treat.

“We’re so proud of you,” she told them. “That’s a certificate for all the good reading you did and we hope you keep doing it.”

Ms. Price-Gordon said she keeps the program low-key so as not to discourage reluctant or struggling readers from participating.

“There’s no magic number of books they have to read, just read as much as they can,” she said.

SUPPORT DOG, continued from page 1

“It will help people because dogs normally and therapy animals normally calm people down,” said fourth-grader Emma Kearney, who feels happy and safe” when she is with her own dog.

Duke will help enhance Pocantico’s therapeutic support program, said Mr. Suarez, who started researching what was required nearly a year ago. A behaviorist said Duke has the demeanor required to be a successful therapy dog. It took time to find trainers and evaluators in the area and schedule sessions.

When Duke starts, he will be another member of the Therapeutic Support Center staff and available to help children who have emotional needs. “It doesn’t work with every child, but there are going to be some children for whom just hugging a dog and petting him for two minutes is enough to help them regulate their emotions and get them ready to enter the classroom again and be available to learn,” Mr. Suarez said.

For other children, just seeing a dog during a time of heightened anxiety, such as testing time, will be enough, he added.

Mr. Suarez said he has learned that therapy dogs work a maximum of two hours a day and he will have to see how Duke does. “I believe that some days will be stronger than others,” he said.

The dog has gone through a lot of training, and now it will be necessary to train the Pocantico population on how to work with the dog.

During their walk, children learned about different types of plants that grow at the preserve, including goldenrod and ragweed. They also had a chance to identify native trees, such as oak, beech and tulip poplar.

“When my son has a play date, it’s my son, his friend, the dog,” Mr. Suarez said. “Duke’s got a huge smile on his face and he’s just running back and forth having a good time.”
Student Athletes Shine in Fall Sports Season

This fall was a fantastic season for all Pocantico athletes. The volleyball, girls soccer, boys soccer and football teams put their heart and soul into their practices and games, despite the sudden rush of cold weather.

The girls volleyball team was the largest it has been in a few years, with 11 players. Coach Mo Gallery taught the fundamentals and rules of the game to many new players. The stands were always full with fellow students, family and community members to cheer the team on. The season was competitive, and the team came out with four wins.

Pocantico was proud to introduce two new soccer coaches: Coach Marlon Calderon for the boys team and Coach Jeremy Schneider for the girls team.

Coach Calderon, who has an extensive background in soccer, not only coached on skills, but also placed a strong emphasis on teamwork. He had the athletes warm up with physical fitness exercises, followed by drill practice with footwork, scoring and passing. Some of the most exciting practices were when the boys team scrimmaged the girls team.

The girls soccer team had only nine players, but Coach Jeremy and the athletes were up for the challenge. The coach provided skill-based practices, helping the girls master the basics of the game while building stamina. The results clearly showed on the field as most of the time the girls played all four quarters against a team of 11.

Through many rainstorms and freezing evenings, both soccer teams persevered and made many strategic plays. The boys were in sync with one another, verbally communicating across the field to score as much as possible. They finished out their season with five wins. The girls supported one another, even though they were short on players. They also won five games.

In football, Pocantico students joined the Sleepy Hollow team. Coach Ryan Tompkins taught the athletes the rules and regulations, as well as how to finesse their skills. Sportsmanship was key to the athletes as they traveled from one school to the next playing very competitive teams. Spirits were high as the athletes won games and developed new friendships.

Congratulations to all the teams on a great and action-packed fall season! Pocantico is looking forward to an exciting winter season of basketball and wrestling.

Emergency Notifications Procedures

In the event that we are forced to close or delay the opening of the district or school, you will receive a notification explaining the situation and providing specific guidance.

School/District Delays and Closures:

In general, emergency notifications are categorized into two main areas: delays and closures.

Delays:

When school is delayed, it will impact both the start of school and associated transportation times. If there is a two-hour delay, for example, school will start two hours later than normal. Additionally, for students who receive transportation services either to Pocantico or other schools, your pick-up time will be two hours later. Students whose normal pick-up time is 7 a.m. will be picked up at 9 a.m.

Closures:

When the Pocantico Hills Central School District is closed, all activities, including all transportation services, are canceled. If there is an event that is localized, such as a power outage on our campus, school will be closed, but transportation services to partner schools may still occur. When this happens, you will receive specific information regarding pick-up and drop-off times directly from Pocantico.

Partner schools will communicate directly with impacted families if they are delayed or closed.

How Will You Receive The Message?

When an emergency occurs, you will be notified of the situation through a variety of communication channels. You will receive an automated call and an email, directly from the school, and the information will be posted on our website. If you have opted to receive text messages and/or if you have the Pocantico Hills CSD app, you will receive the notification through those channels as well. District-specific weather-related closing information is also shared with News 12 Westchester, WABC-TV New York, Patch, WHUD-FM 100.7, and superintendent.calkins on Instagram.

When Will Closing Information Be Disseminated?

This information will be communicated to families in as timely a fashion as possible. Sometimes it may be feasible to notify you the night before the event takes place. Other times, you will receive notifications in the morning. We will try to communicate this information to you between 5:30 a.m. and 6 a.m.

Other Emergency Situations:

We will also use the aforementioned communication channels to communicate other emergency information to you. A good example of this would be if we were forced to close school and send our students home early.
District Developing Comprehensive Energy-Saving Initiative

The district is developing a project to save energy and increase efficiency by improving lighting and heating, tightening up the building and installing solar panels. Superintendent Richard Calkins’ administration is working with energy specialists on what is called an energy performance contract. It would cut the district’s energy costs by an estimated minimum of 61 percent, in large part due to solar energy the school would harness.

After conducting a preliminary audit, Day Automation of Ontario County estimated that Pocantico could make $2.4 million in upgrades that would be more than offset by tremendous energy savings. The net project benefit over the 18-year energy performance contract would be $1.7 million.

The project would provide everything from new LED lighting to enhanced heating systems to harnessing solar energy that would save money and reduce the building’s carbon footprint by 30 percent, the superintendent said. “At the end, it not only is an excellent and responsible use of community resources, but it is also the right thing to do,” he said.

Pocantico could use reserves to pay for some or all of the project. It would not need voter approval because it is a state-supported initiative and the state approves the contract and the district’s ability to complete the work. However, a yes vote from the community would double state building aid from 10% to 20%. The energy performance contract would also qualify for incentives from local utilities.

Putting the proposal up for a vote would also show the community what the district is doing to preserve the building and Pocantico’s history and plan for the future, the superintendent said. “We want them to be excited about it and see that we’re working hard to take care of this amazing facility,” he said.

Representatives of Day Automation presented findings from the initial audit to the Board of Education in mid-October. Their recommendations include upgrading all lighting to LED bulbs; adding lighting controls; and tightening up the building through air sealing, insulation and door weather-stripping.

They proposed upgrading the building’s computer-based control system and adding new equipment. Pocantico currently has a number of different types of systems, according to Josh Ettinger, sales engineer for Day.

“It’s just really going to streamline everything going forward and it’s going to be really foundational as you’re trying to build the district up and get new equipment,” he said.

In terms of mechanical systems, the work would entail changing a few pumps, and adding a shoulder boiler. The current boilers are large and not working as efficiently as they could be. The shoulder boiler would be a more efficient boiler to help during the “shoulder months” in the spring and fall.

Finally, the district would add a sizeable solar array on part of the building – 400 kilowatts. “That’s going to really, really reduce your carbon footprint,” Mr. Ettinger said. “It’s going to be significant savings.”

As part of the energy performance contract, the selected company would guarantee an annual savings for the school district. It would make up the difference if there were any shortfall. Day Automation’s preliminary audit estimated $147,000 a year in savings and $94,666 annually in utility incentives.

The district issued a request for proposals for the work, and the next step in the process is to select a company. Once a partner is chosen, the proposed energy performance contract would have to be approved by the state Education Department. The target date for starting work would be October 2020.

As an added bonus, the partner would provide educational support to the school district about the energy-saving initiative, such as curriculum workshops and professional development for teachers.

Halloween at Pocantico

Students and staff members had a great time dressing up for Halloween this year. Everyone had a chance to vote on what Principal Adam Brown should be, and they decided on the tooth fairy. The costume, supplied by the PTA, included a wig, wand and tutu. Mr. Brown wore it with a smile. Other fun and creative costumes included a bookworm, dominoes, stick figures and zombies.
Students and staff celebrated Hispanic Heritage Month with visits from a Colombian music and dance group, and a Peruvian singer and storyteller, along with other events.

Cumbia for Kids performed music and dance from different regions of Colombia, including African “currulao” from the Pacific Coast region, the “joropo” of the Eastern Plains region, and the “bambuco fiestero” of the Andes Mountains.

Anna Povich de Mayor, co-artistic director, described how Spanish and African cultures mixed with Colombia’s. Spanish explorers brought their elegant dress and strong traditions of guitar, song and dance. Spanish settlers brought African slaves there, a sad part of Colombian history, but the Africans contributed their rich culture of rhythm and drums. The native people had a strong connection to the land and instruments like gaita flutes and maracas.

“Together they created something beautiful,” she said at the Oct. 15 event.

Principal Adam Brown said the event was an incredible celebration of cultures and music, as well as a lesson about diversity within a single country. “It’s amazing how when cultures and people blend together, what the fabric of the country begins to sound like depending on where in that one country you are from,” he said.

Along with the five musicians, two dancers performed with Cumbia for Kids. In one piece, they imitated harvesting coffee berries in the Andes, drying them, grinding them and drinking the coffee as they danced.

Students clapped, sang along in some songs, and danced around the auditorium at the end of the program. A handful of children helped perform a welcome song on stage.

Later that week, on Oct. 18, Peruvian singer/songwriter Flor Bromley sang songs that represented music styles from throughout Latin America. She performed for children in pre-kindergarten through second grade.

In a song with Peruvian influences, Ms. Bromley asked a student in each of two sessions to accompany her by playing a quijada, an instrument made of a donkey’s jawbone. They elicited a dull twang when they banged a fist on it.

Ms. Bromley, who performed with a cajón player and a keyboardist, invited six students to perform “De Colores” with her. She gave them each a colorful scarf to ball up for winter and make bloom into a flower when she sang “primaveras” (spring), then a bird (un pajarito), and finally a rainbow (un arco iris).

She also entertained the children with a song about people from different countries coming to America, allowing some students to wave little flags of different countries as she played. One of their favorite activities was a song in which they danced while she played and had to freeze each time she stopped.

First-grader Antares P. started dancing immediately after Ms. Bromley started the concert, delighting his classmates. “I like the songs because they make me dance,” he said.

Second-graders Ella P. and Maeve G. enjoyed watching Antares dance, and participating in the “De Colores” song. “I like when we danced and when we made the flower,” Maeve said.

The chorus spent the day of the concert in Norwalk, visiting the Maritime Aquarium and viewing the IMAX movie “Dolphins.”

“It was fun to just get to be playful and fool around before we had to be really serious and focus,” Katie said.
In her bestselling book "I Am Yoga," children’s author Susan Verde shows that the tradition can be an antidote to a “wiggly body,” and a world that is “spinning so fast.” Yoga helps people open their minds, touch the sky, love and be calm, she wrote.

When she spoke to Pocantico children on Oct. 11, Ms. Verde immediately drew them into this world by asking them to close their eyes, place one hand on their heart and one on their belly, and breathe in through their nose and out through their mouth.

“Doing this kind of breathing helps your mind and body calm down, helps you focus, helps you pay attention right where you are,” she said. “How many times during the day do you have to pay attention? A bazillion.”

She also asked children to recite positive affirmations. “I am a good person. I am a kind person. I am a beautiful person. I love myself,” she said, asking them to repeat each statement.

Ms. Verde spoke with pre-kindergarten through fourth-grade students as part of the school’s Author Visit series, which the PTA sponsors. “We really are so lucky because we couldn’t do our Author Visit program without the support of our PTA,” said Anne Price-Gordon, library media specialist.

Writing is invigorating and exciting, said Ms. Verde, whose books include "The Museum," “The Water Princess” and the "I Am" series. She also teaches yoga and mindfulness to children. Before becoming a published author, she taught kindergarten, nursery school and fifth grade.

“What’s been an added benefit for me is being able to come to schools and visit with kids because I loved being a teacher and it’s something I miss,” she said. “I always say if I weren't doing this, that's what I would hope to be doing.”

Ms. Verde told students about her children and pets, including a tarantula named Cuddles whose photo made her audience scream. She read one of her books to the students in the different sessions, as well as a poem called “The Spider in My Shower.”

Ms. Verde said one of her goals is to write stories that lift people up. “In the ‘I Am’ books, I really wanted to write about feeling good,” she said. The first thing she thought about was yoga. “It’s hard to worry when you’re in a yoga pose,” she said.

Ms. Verde told children it is important for them to stay confident and remember how awesome they are. “We spend a lot of time being nice to others, which is really important, but we need to be nice to ourselves first, too, right?” she said. “If we don’t feel good about ourselves, it’s hard to be kind to other people.”

She also talked about the importance of being kind to others, even if you disagree about something. “Being human means you can say, ‘I know how you feel,’ and you can choose kindness.”