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Lake Villa Elementary District 41 Superintendent Lynette Zimmer walks the halls of Olive C. Martin Elementary School with her trained therapy dog, Jeep, on Wednesday during a parade to honor the pair's pending retirement. (Brian Hill | Staff Photographer)



Mick Zawislak

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A little fluff in the morning goes a long way, says Lynette Zimmer, superintendent at Lake Villa Elementary District 41.

She's referring to the expansive soft coat of her dog, Jeep, a huge 105-pound Great Pyrenees that students in District 41 schools have known and loved for

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bear of an emotional support dog to the office most days. But the pair -- always wearing matching scarves and sometimes matching tutus -- also are well known at the district's three elementary and one middle school.

"They've loved her for years. They all ask for Jeep to come here," said Scott Klene, principal at Martin Elementary School.

There are Jeep pillows and puzzles. She has a blog (<https://jeepthedog.com/>). Three books Zimmer wrote about Jeep are favorites in the school library.

However, Zimmer and Jeep are retiring soon, and the visits will be ending.

That's why students at Olive C. Martin Elementary lined the halls Wednesday for a surprise goodbye organized by Jennifer Carter, a special education teacher.

"It is hard to imagine one without the other as they have been working side by side for several years," Carter said. "They are a unit."

Some students made cards and others brought flowers. On top of daily learning and end-of-year testing, her students for the past two weeks cut, glued and taped balloons with pictures and written memories of Jeep on a wall of windows near the school office.

"My favorite memory of Jeep is when I pet you and you make me feel happy," read one.

Neither are strangers at Martin Elementary but Zimmer may have thought something was afoot when Jeep was fitted with a collar cam for the visit. The video will be a going-away memento.

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The surprise continued in another hallway.

"I'm shocked. Stunned," Zimmer said. "You kids held it together well. What a lovely thing to happen."

Zimmer has been with District 41 nine years. She said she always has marveled at how dogs bond with humans and had her first registered therapy dog, a Golden Retriever named Chili, while an assistant superintendent at Fremont Elementary District 79 in Mundelein.

Besides schools, Chile worked at Easter Seals adult and kids camp in Milwaukee and chemotherapy wards in children's hospitals. Chili died a month before Zimmer got Jeep, her first Pyrenees.

She said she picked the breed for their gentleness.

"Pyrenees are amazing with kids. They're guard animals and want to make sure everything smaller than them is safe," she said.

"Kids go through a lot and they'll tell Jeep anything," Zimmer added. "They write her letters. She's a magical dog."

Therapy dogs, Zimmer notes, can get to places with kids that sometimes elude adults. Many times, without a word or command, Jeep knows who to go to, who is hurting and who needs help and support, Zimmer said.

Carter said it can be overwhelming to have the big boss visit her classroom. But the anxiety fades when Zimmer is followed by a huge, fluffy dog.

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Why the name Jeep? "I love Jeeps," said Zimmer, who has a restored 1947 Willy's. "Jeeps are fun."

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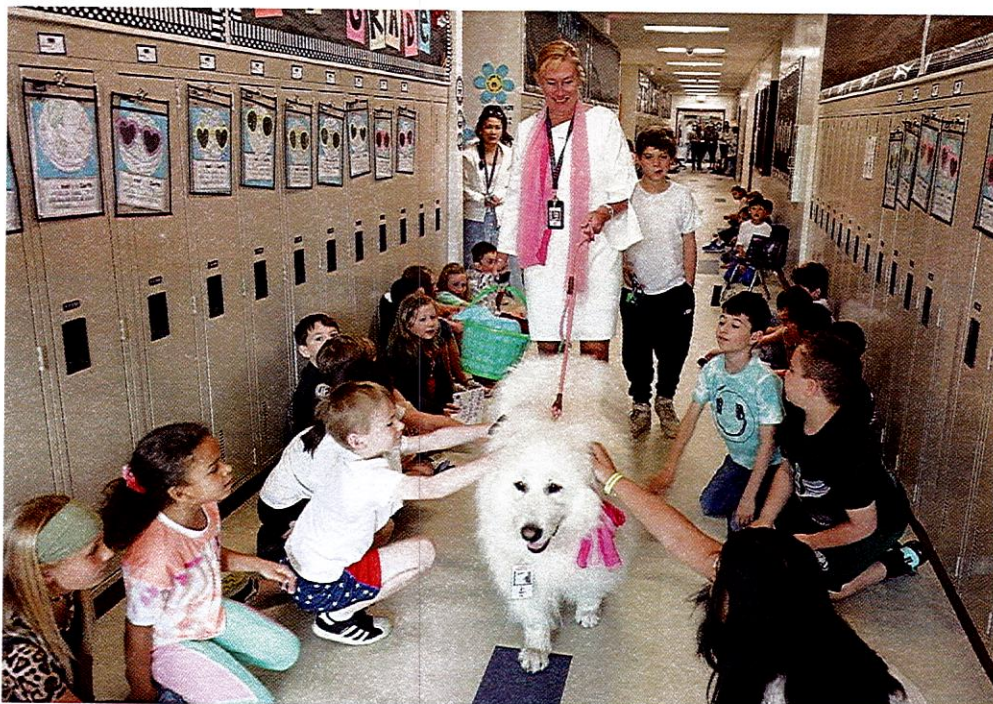
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Lake Villa Elementary District 41 Superintendent Lynette Zimmer collects flowers from students Wednesday at Olive C. Martin Elementary School. (Brian Hill | Staff Photographer)