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A Career Change Helps Chuckie and Chester Reach Their Full Potential as Therapy Dogs



Courtesy Elizabeth Solaka

When black Lab Chuckie has his bib removed at the end of the day, he knows it's time to goof off. But once that fabric is tied around his furry neck in the morning, the 18-month-old pooch is all business. It's not magic, it's his job: The perky pup is a therapy dog, working to help nearly 1,400 developmentally disabled children and adults at the Block Institute in Brooklyn, NY.

Chuckie and his brother Chester first arrived at the Block Institute in August, by way of Leader Dogs for the Blind, a charitable organization in Rochester Hills, Mich. "We had some dogs that had to be career changed," explains Greg Grabowski, CEO of Leader Dogs for the Blind. "They're great dogs, but there's a very unique, specific DNA trait they were missing that disqualified them from becoming guide dogs." After a chance meeting with Dr. Scott Barkin of the Block Institute, the two decided that a partnership was in order.

"This is a total first for us," Grabowski tells PEOPLEPets.com. "We just had this epiphany." Typically, Leader Dogs puts their career change dogs up for adoption — the organization has a three-year waitlist — but decided even more good could be done by donating two dogs to the Block Institute, which was in the market for canine companions. "There are statistics that show autistic kids who don't respond to touch from adults

oftentimes respond to dogs. It's a great win-win situation," Grabowski says.

Chuckie and Chester now visit the Block Institute daily; Chuckie spends his time with pre-schoolers, while Chester's time is divided between children and adult students. "It's been incredible," Barkin tells PEOPLEPets.com. "Kids who came to school daily and didn't have a well-developed vocabulary are now talking to the dogs. The dogs come into the classroom and kids take turns reading to them, and that's something they might not do with an adult. It's been everything we hoped for."

Though the dogs are actively working in the classrooms, they're still being trained toward certification as therapy dogs, thanks to an on-site trainer at the Block Institute. "We taught them basics, like sit, stay," says Grabowski. "But there are nuances to being a therapy dog that we didn't train them for."

At night, Chuckie goes home with Barkin, while Chester goes home with another one of the Block Institute's 500 staffers. "It's really nice for the dog because he knows he's working during the day," says Grabowski. "So he has one kind of demeanor while at the Institute, and gets to play when he goes home." Cutely, Chuckie carools into work every morning with Barkin.

The Block Institute hopes to expand their partnership in the year ahead, potentially adding more dogs to the program and even training adult students in dog grooming. Though a few parents were skeptical of incorporating dogs into the classroom at first, Barkin says after seeing the progress students have made, it's become an easy sell. And it's not just parents who've fallen in love with the pups — it's everyone.

"Having these two dogs here all day every day has had a calming effect," Barkin says. "It's really brought us all together."

To learn more about [Leader Dogs for the Blind](#) and the [Block Institute](#), visit their **Web sites.**