

Love at first bark: Dog bonds with autistic boy

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The Molokie family of Plumsted recently welcomed Butkus, a female bullmastiff mix, into their home. Butkus and son Kevin (left) have become friends. PHOTOS BY MITCH GEIER When the Molokie family of the Cream Ridge section of Plumsted considered adopting a dog, their first thought was how their son, Kevin, would adjust. Kevin has been diagnosed with autism, and while he has pets — cats, a toad, and fish — he was wary of dogs.

After much consideration, the family went to the Ocean County Animal Facility North in Jackson to see which dogs were available for adoption.

The Molokie family praised the staff at the Ocean County Animal Facility, saying the shelter staff members who worked with the their family to help them select a dog were patient, considerate, helpful and encouraging.

Mom Vicki said that when they met the dog they eventually adopted (a female bullmastiff mix), she immediately won over everyone in the family, except Kevin.



Vicki said the dog knew she had to win over Kevin — and she did.

Three months have passed since the Molokie family brought the dog home. The now-pampered pet was named Butkus by Kevin after Rocky Balboa's English mastiff from the "Rocky" films.

Butkus seems completely at home in the Molokie household. Kevin and Butkus have developed a strong friendship, and Kevin has shifted from being a boy who did not like dogs to telling Butkus, "You know, you're really an OK dog, and I love you so much."

The family — mom, Vicki; dad, Leon; older brother, Ryan; nephew, Connor; and Kevin — has been actively training Butkus.

Friend, neighbor and trainer Lorie Citarella has been helping to train the dog, and said she has seen tremendous progress.

Kevin is now comfortable walking Butkus and controlling her when they encounter another dog. He is also able to communicate to Butkus that she can stop barking — a significant step since Kevin does not like barking dogs.

What has been the biggest impact of bringing Butkus into the Molokie family for Kevin?

“Confidence and companionship” is the difference that Citarella said she sees in Kevin.

Citarella said the entire family works together to support each other in training their dog, and she said Kevin has grown so much in his comfort level and ability to control Butkus.

“What a wonderful family,” Citarella said.

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