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## Companions for Life

NEW ORLEANS - Dogs live in our homes, steal our hearts, and become our best friends. But for one Algiers family, their canine has become even more. For five-year-old Tyler Zelaya, playing in the park with his dog isn't just fun. It's a form of therapy. "I like to play with him and I'm not scared of him," said Tyler.

"Oh they're so happy together. It's like a match, like best friends," said Tyler's mother Nikki Grant.

Tyler was diagnosed with autism at a young age, and has some difficulties with social interactions, said Grant.

"He never really focused, he had a lot of developmental delays," said Grant.

But ever since Bear, a Chow -Lab mix, came into their lives nearly three months ago, Grant said her son is communicating in ways he never did before.

"He's actually going up to people and telling them hello and waving at them and asking them what their name is," said Grant.

In fact, within 20 minutes of their first meeting, Grant knew Tyler and Bear had something special.

"Without me telling Tyler, he's not the type of child that's just going to take initiative, he goes out and he gets a bowl of water and some food for him," said Grant. "I just thought that was amazing."

Tyler is changing Bear's life, too. The canine was a stray, rescued from Westbank streets last year, and brought to the Jefferson Parish shelter.

That's where Bill Barse comes in. He founded a growing non-profit called Doggone Express, which runs a program called From the Big House to Your House. It teaches Louisiana inmates serving time in prison to train select shelter dogs, making them more adoptable.

"They're doing their time but they're not sitting there doing nothing," said Barse. "They are difference makers."

The dogs live in prison with the inmates for six weeks. Some dogs, like Bear, are trained for service.

"If it's a situation where we know the canine needs to be able to do specific tasks then we train for that task," said Barse.

Bear is the program's first dog to be adopted by a family with an autistic child. He was originally trained to respond to symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome. But when Barse got a call from the Grant family, he knew Bear could be a good fit.

"It's kind of a gut feeling you have," said Barse. "We watch the dog, we do a lot of assessments." So far, experts say there hasn't yet been a lot of research to show dogs can help treat the symptoms of autism, but Grant says seeing Bear with her son is all the proof she needs. "He's more open," said Grant. "I think I owe that to Bear because he's more accepting."

And now a boy and his dog are giving each other a new "leash" on life, and forming a friendship that will last a lifetime.

"I like him, and he's the best," said Tyler.

A companion dog may not work for every child with autism. But Barse is willing to give it a trial run with any interested family.

If you would like to find out more, call Bill Barse at 504-239-0398 or log onto <http://doggoneexpress.com/>.