

A Talk That Won't Be a Dog and Pony Show

By Michael Jacobs

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More than 40 books and their authors are part of the 26th Book Festival of the Marcus JCC, but only one author talk includes a four-legged attraction.

When Donnie Kanter Winokur speaks about the memoir “Chancer: How One Good Boy Saved Another” at 10 a.m. Thursday, Nov. 16, she plans to have a golden retriever named Quinn, her family’s service dog, at her side.

He’s not the dog on the cover of “Chancer” or either of the good boys referred to in the title, but he does play a significant role in the book and, more important, for the family of Temple Kehillat Chaim Rabbi Harvey Winokur.

Chancer was the first service dog to work with thier son Iyal, whom the Winokurs adopted as a baby from Russia, along with a baby girl, Morasha.

While Morasha is a sophomore at Queens University in Charlotte, where her mother said she is thriving, Iyal has a different life, thanks to fetal alcohol syndrome disorder. It’s a much better life because of Chancer and Quinn.

“Chancer” tells of the desper-

tion and frustration that led Donnie to reach out to service dog organization 4 Paws to ask whether a dog could be trained to work with an FASD child. Because the symptoms and cues are similar to other developmental disabilities, it was possible, and Chancer and Iyal proved to be a perfect pair.

As shown in the book, Iyal lives in a literal world. He struggles with things that are conceptual and figurative rather than concrete.

Donnie said he has made progress, however, through nearly a decade of having a service dog to calm him when his frustration mounts.

Those gains might have been lost when Chancer died this spring if not for Quinn, who has his own personality but somehow also is the perfect fit for both Iyal and his parents.

During an interview at Kehillat Chaim, Quinn remained calm, but Donnie said she could tell he was restless and ready to work off some energy

through a game of catch with the rabbi if it wasn’t time for Iyal to come home.

In that sense, Chancer’s death was a loss for Quinn as well as the rest of the family. He no longer has a fellow dog to play with. He will play with the family cats, although Donnie said he won’t walk past one.

Donnie, meanwhile, has shown a willingness to walk any path for her family and for efforts to raise awareness of the capabilities of service dogs and the prevalence and effects of fetal alcohol syndrome disorders.

She is honest and open about the tough times she and Rabbi Winokur experienced before Chancer — including some surprising language from a rebbetzin. But after a couple of decades at Kehillat Chaim, and with her husband’s retirement on the horizon, she said she’s not worried about shocking any congregants.

Through necessity, Donnie Winokur has become an expert on dogs

and their potential as more than pets — like Chancer and Quinn, she had to go through hundreds of hours of training with 4 Paws, plus occasional refreshers, to be certified as a service dog handler.

She can demonstrate Quinn’s discipline when she tells him to leave a dog treat, and she can share the surprise at his love of broccoli and carrots.

She also knows more than most about the incidence and effects of fetal alcohol syndrome disorder and about how the world responds both to people who have hidden disabilities — people can’t see how Iyal’s brain does and doesn’t work — and to service dogs, as opposed to family pets.

Despite federal law, which requires that service dogs with certified handlers be allowed to go anywhere with people, Donnie still runs into the occasional bus driver, air crew or amusement park manager who turns Quinn away, even though they carry copies of the relevant statutes.

While the four-legged presenter might bring excitement to the free talk Nov. 16, attendees will see that Donnie Winokur is the star of the show. ■

