

**AT OU-TULSA, THE MOST POPULAR GRADUATE  
IN THE CLASS OF 2011 WAS A HUSKY BLOND  
WITH INTELLIGENCE, GENEROSITY,  
A WILLINGNESS TO SERVE—AND FOUR LEGS.**

# Top Dog on Campus

BY CONNIE CRONLEY  
PHOTOS PROVIDED

**I**t's a dog-eat-dog world out there.  
Every advantage helps, especially education.

That is why Samson has a leg up. The two-year-old yellow Labrador retriever received an honorary diploma during OU-Tulsa spring convocation ceremonies. He was the only canine among more than 300 two-legged animals in 27 academic disciplines awarded their degrees by OU-Tulsa President Gerard Clancy.

Samson, wearing a red-and-white cap and gown, holds OU's first "dog-torate," says Kevin Rudeen, dean of the OU College of Allied Health. He probably has the only dogtorate in the nation, and his graduation received considerable media coverage.

Despite Samson's academic credentials, he is a modest fellow. He does not stand on ceremony and insist on being addressed as Dr. Samson. When I met him, he was content to lie on the floor and answer to just plain Samson. That is rare behavior on a university campus.

Many new graduates are busy job hunting. Not Samson. He has a job waiting for him. Since puppyhood, Samson has been trained through Therapeutics Service Dogs of Oklahoma for a career aiding people with mobility issues. His specialty is helping humans with physical disabilities, and he seems to have an affinity for people on walkers or in wheelchairs. In fact, during the ceremonies, he tried to give his diploma to a woman on stage in a wheelchair.

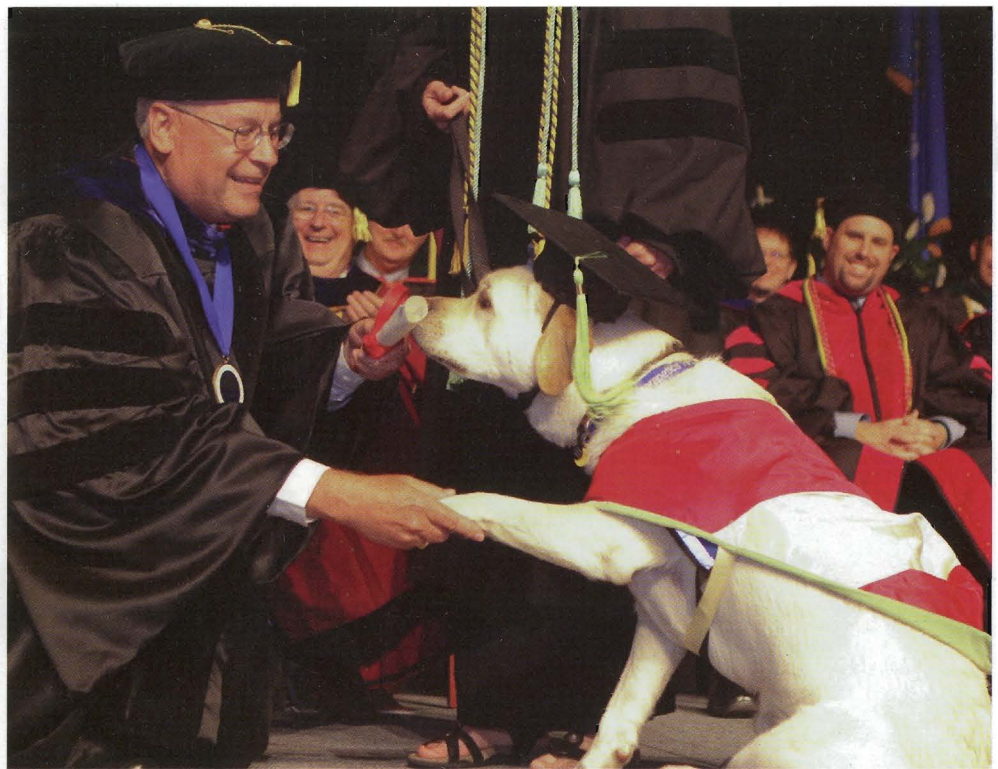
Just because Samson's degree is honorary, do not think he dogged it through college. For two years, he attended classes and labs like other physical therapy and occupational therapy students. He worked with clients in clinical field work. He had homework to complete. He showed up at special events at the OU-Tulsa Schusterman campus demonstrating service animals' effectiveness. He was virtually voted "Most Popular" because it was his fellow students who requested that he participate in spring convocations for both OU-Tulsa and the College of Allied Health.

He owes much of his success to the mentor who was with him all the way. Mary Isaacson is an as-

sistant professor and academic fieldwork coordinator in the College of Allied Health's Department of Rehabilitation Sciences. She is also a volunteer with Therapeutics, a non-profit organization that breeds, trains and places its dogs with Oklahomans with physical disabilities. The dogs' rather bland job description is to provide mobility assistance. What they really give their human companions, Isaacson says, is independence. "They empower people to live life more fully."

Isaacson ought to receive a special dogtorate herself. She demonstrated incredible doggedness in assuring Samson's success. He lived with her for two years. They were together 24/7. She attended weekly training sessions with him and Therapeutics' professional dog trainers. She worked with Samson on his homework assignments to perfect his skills.

"She deserves the spotlight," says Therapeutics' Executive Director Susan Hartman. "She invested her heart and soul in Samson." Far more than puppy trainers, Therapeutics' volunteers



Samson, Class of 2011, receives his diploma from Allied Health Dean Kevin Rudeen. The service dog crossed the stage to give his treasure to a person in a wheelchair.

are given a high level of responsibility, Hartman says. They are accountable for producing a well-trained dog. The volunteer work requires such special traits that five or six people are auditioned for every trainer who is chosen.

## “LABS RESPOND WELL TO POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT AND TREATS. CHEESE WHIZ WORKS REALLY WELL.”

It is even tougher for puppies to make the cut. Despite the popular idiom and the Toby Keith song, every dog does not have its day at Therapeutics. Puppy candidates are tested at eight weeks. Besides excellent health backgrounds, they must demonstrate the

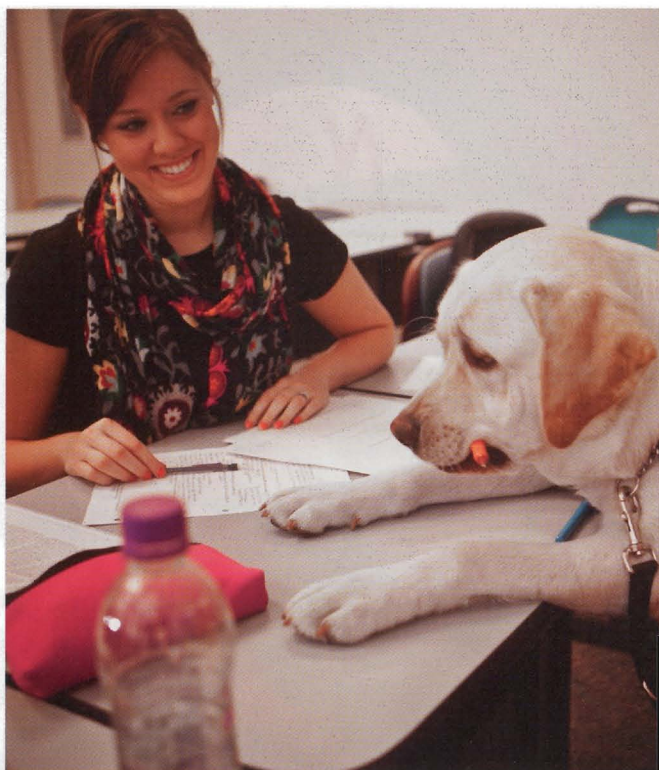
right demeanor—energetic but not untrainable, curious but not dangerously so. Yellow Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers are often chosen to be service dogs, Isaacson says, because they have a strong work ethic and are passionate about people.

Samson comes from a gifted canine family. Three of his litter mates also were selected. Not only is he a quick learner, Hartman says, "he has a special spark. He bonds well with people."

So what exactly can Samson do to help the person to whom he will be assigned? These dogs learn basic obedience, advanced obedience and special tasks. They can pull a grocery cart, load a front-loading washing machine, retrieve the car keys, fetch the remote control or the phone.

Samson can pick up dropped items, open and close doors, turn lights on and off, provide balance and more. He has learned how to open a refrigerator, and he has learned discipline to go with that task, Hartman says. He is trained to get only bottled water out of the fridge and not help himself to other items. (Memo to myself: How can I train some humans I know to do this?)

"I never realized what all we can teach a dog to do," Isaacson says. "Labs respond well to positive reinforcement and treats. Cheese Whiz works really well."



Samson practices his service techniques by retrieving a pen for Lindsey Baker, a second-year occupational therapy student in Tulsa.



Turning lights on and off is just one of many ways Samson renders assistance. He also can pull a grocery cart, load a washing machine, open and close doors, retrieve car keys, fetch the remote and more.

Samson has been so valuable in teaching students in Rehabilitation Sciences, he might qualify for adjunct instructor status. "He has been an extension of what we do to educate our students," Isaacson says. "They will now go out into their professions knowing how a service animal can help people who are physically impaired but do not need 24/7 care. Our students now know that a service animal can be a good referral source."

Samson was so successful in showing students how a service animal can help them in their jobs, Rudeen says, he would welcome more animals into the college. "He was a star. A star among a constellation," the dean says, proudly referring to the 625 Allied Health students on the Tulsa and Oklahoma City campuses.

People fall in love with Therapeutics animals, Hartman says, "because our dogs seem part human. They're thinkers and problem solvers."

The creativity of problem solving is what attracted Isaacson to occupational therapy. As a child, she was good at science and math and thought she wanted to be a veterinarian. After all, it was a family profession; her grandfather was a veterinarian in Oklahoma Territory. But she also has an artistic bent and a love for non-profit work. As a young girl in Camp Fire, she discovered the field of occupational therapy. It offers her just the right balance of science with the creativity of inventing solutions for physical impairments. Fold in non-profit Therapeutics and working with animals, and her life is good.

And Samson? He is now ready to run with the big dogs. A three-year-old German Shepherd protection dog with similar special training in elite military units recently sold for \$230,000. Samson's training at Therapeutics cost \$15,000. What is Samson's worth? To change a person's life? To enable that person to live independently and more fully? Invaluable.

Samson seems to know it is his destiny to be a service animal, Hartman says. He works hard, and he plays hard. When his vest goes on, he goes to work. But when the vest comes off, he gets to be a dog. He likes being with other dogs. Isaacson has two of her own, a chocolate Lab named Hershey and a Jack Russell terrier mix named Jake. The dogs play together, chase one another, swim and go camping with Isaacson.

Still, despite his diploma, Samson has post-graduate work ahead of him. He already has his career assignment, a young man in a wheel chair. The two of them will go through 100 hours of training learning to work together.

After being so close for two years, how can Isaacson say good-bye to Samson? It is much like sending a child off to college, she says, or seeing a foster child placed in a permanent home. "I'll be supportive. I'll support Samson, and I'll support the young man. Then I'll do my crying in private."

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