

PROFESSOR PAWS



Warm brown eyes and a wagging tail greet students in an occupational therapy class where they learn firsthand what a service dog can do for their future patients.

BY GLENDA SILVEY
PHOTOS BY AARON ANDERSON

When it comes to happy life experiences, picking out a puppy ranks way up there; a literal wave of the warm fuzzies.

Mary Isaacson, Ed.D, assistant professor in the Department of Rehabilitative Sciences at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa and an occupational therapist for more than 30 years, was feeling that in the summer of 2013 – eagerly looking forward to bringing home the newest of many dogs she’s loved throughout her life. Working with a reputable, experienced Oklahoma breeder, Isaacson was monitoring the growth of a new litter of plump and playful yellow Labrador retrievers.

All, of course, were adorable, but not all would have the particular traits Isaacson was seeking. She knew her choice was an especially important one, with potential to affect many lives for the better. Her pick of the litter would become the face and focus of the Professor Paws Project, an educational program she developed at OU-Tulsa to educate students, healthcare providers and the public about the benefits of service dogs. When the big day arrived, Isaacson and the breeder narrowed the selection to two males.

“This dog would have to be calm, courageous, friendly, adaptive and unafraid of new situations,” Isaacson says. “We conducted temperament testing, and both of them tested well, but one of them clearly had more spark and energy – you could tell he liked people more.”

And the feeling was mutual. Word of the blessed event had spread at the OU-Tulsa Schusterman Center, and like a family gathering to receive a new baby, students, faculty and staff excitedly awaited word of his arrival. The lucky dog became an immediate Sooner star, with fawning fans. A campus-wide contest selected the name “Niko,” for him, derivative of the Greek name Nikolas, which means “victory of the people.”

“We chose that name because of what it means and represents,” says Isaacson. “Through service dog education, we hope to empower others. That’s our role and goal as occupational therapists: to help people become more free and independent to do the things that are important to them.”

Niko arrived with big paws to fill – those of Samson, a yellow Lab that Isaacson had trained while volunteering for Therapeutics, an Oklahoma nonprofit that trains and places



Niko, known as "Professor Paws," demonstrates how service dogs can assist in opening automated doors for individuals with disabilities.

service dogs for people with mobility and psychiatric service needs. When she saw the difference Samson made in the lives of some of her patients in rehabilitation, she began integrating him into her occupational therapy classes at OU-Tulsa. Samson became so beloved on campus that students asked he be included in their Convocation ceremony, where – wearing a mortar board – he received his “dog-torate” degree. In 2011, Samson was placed with high school freshman Bryce Wooten of Edmond. Wooten, who has cerebral palsy, now navigates a college campus with Samson’s help.

“Samson not only helps Bryce physically, he’s given him the confidence to be independent,” says Bryce’s mom, Ashley Wooten. “Samson and Bryce go everywhere together. They have even visited Mary’s [Isaacson] class to show her students how much service dogs can do.”

Observing Samson and Bryce in action, students witnessed how service dogs could help their future patients, and Isaacson saw potential for an ongoing program. With donations and seed money from the OU-Tulsa Campus Campaign, Isaacson launched the program, and Niko was hired as the first “Professor Paws.” Unlike Samson, he will not be placed with a disabled person, nor will he work directly with patients.

“His purpose is to educate people about what service dogs can do for individuals,” Isaacson emphasizes. “Niko is trained to demonstrate how such dogs can assist a patient who falls, for example. If they drop their medicine, he can pick it up. The dog can retrieve the phone, turn on lights, open doors, pick up a dropped pair of socks. We find that people don’t always know the difference between a service dog and a therapy dog. Service dogs are trained to do specific tasks, protected by the Americans With Disabilities Act, enabling them to go out into the public with their owners. A therapy dog is any dog who can be trained for service, such as going to hospitals to have fun with patients, make them feel better.”

Niko goes along with Isaacson to most of the OT classes she teaches.



Though an adorable pup, Niko was hand-picked by trainer and owner Mary Isaacson for a very special job — educating students, health-care providers and the public about how service dogs can change lives.

“To me, the students get to see Niko as a piece of living technology. Someone may need a wheelchair as technology to get around. A service dog is no different. He’s a piece of live technology.”

If not demonstrating skills, Niko usually lies near students or Isaacson, quiet but observant. Meredith Wyatt, occupational therapy graduate assistant, recalled an incident in which Isaacson was instructing students in a lab and didn’t notice when she dropped a piece of paper.

“Niko saw it, went to her immediately, picked up the paper and handed it to her. She never cued him; he’d just been watching.”

When not in class or his “office” in the College of Allied Health, Niko lives with Isaacson, his handler and primary trainer. However, students also assist with Niko’s training, as does Wyatt, who loves the assignment.

“He’s so effective as a learning tool. You could provide service dog education, but it wouldn’t be nearly as effective without Niko’s presence. He’s a special dog – very sweet. He genuinely likes people and is trained to do such interesting things. He really teaches the students the capabilities of a service dog for someone who needs one.”



Niko and graduate assistant Meredith Wyatt visit a local elementary school. Niko's name was chosen during a campus-wide contest and is Greek for "victory of the people."

Isaacson is working to expand the educational outreach of the Professor Paws program to include healthcare providers and the community at large. A Tulsa Area United Way Innovation grant allowed Isaacson and Niko to teach classes at Tulsa's Center for Individuals with Physical Challenges. OU-Tulsa Occupational Therapy graduate student Caitlin Pottorf attended the classes while volunteering at the center.

"As OT students, our job is to help people become more independent. Through those classes, I saw that the difference a service dog can make is profound – from being a mobility dog, for example, to helping people get around in their environment, or a medical alert dog, which can detect when a seizure is about to occur. The Professor Paws Project is crucial to our community because there's such a lack of awareness about their capabilities."

Isaacson hopes to develop more programs at the community and medical levels, including which diagnoses or disabilities might benefit from service dogs, and how people should act around the animals. Niko recently performed a demonstration at an OU Physicians clinic to educate staff how to interact with patients who arrive with a service dog.

Kevin Rudeen, Ph.D., dean of the OU College of Allied

Health, considers the Professor Paws Program significant to its educational efforts.

"The importance of students' opportunity to interact with Niko firsthand – or in this case, first paw – cannot be overstated. They benefit by seeing how dynamically a service animal can support individuals with diverse challenges and how dogs such as Niko play a crucial role in maximizing their potential."

Now two- and-a half, Niko oozes canine charisma. Work and classes at the Schusterman Center often pause wherever he goes, and people wait turns to pet, praise, and play with him. There's competition to puppy-sit. He's in frequent demand for campus events, or simply for the comfort of a dog's company. Isaacson relayed a recent example of the emotional support Niko provides to students and staff. A group of OU medical students, stressed after a tough exam, texted her: "Can Niko come over and hang out?"

If the first Professor Paws could talk, what would he say about his job? That he loves it, his trainers say.

Wyatt observes, "I think he really enjoys demonstrating his skills. There have been times when we don't even need to cue him. He knows it's his moment."


"He's in heaven," adds Isaacson. "He perks up and his eyes brighten as if to say, 'I get to show off!'"

Niko loves his work, but also his play, and knows the difference by whether his service dog vest is on or off. Isaacson wondered if students might think he didn't love his job because he becomes so excited when the vest comes off, signaling he's free to play. Fetch is his favorite, along with swimming in summertime. He likes to go for car rides and look out the window at the scenery. Not exactly a dog's life.

Isaacson's goal is to raise adequate support to ultimately make the Professor Paws Project sustainable, allowing it to expand to the OU Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City, and perhaps acquire another service dog. That requires fundraising, such as the upcoming campaign with the popular Rustic Cuff jewelry line in Tulsa (see *Professorpaws.org*).

At every demonstration where Niko performs, staff conducts pretesting and post testing to determine participants' level of knowledge about service dogs and whether the program is changing that. In doing so, Isaacson says, they're fulfilling OU's mission of service, research and education. Data has been gathered for two research projects so far.

"In a perfect world," Isaacson says, "everyone who needs a service dog could have one. We hope what we're doing with Niko will somehow help bring that about. Again, we're here to educate – that's his main job."

"But Niko's side job is making people happy." 

Glenda Silvey is a freelance writer living in Tulsa.