

PAWPRINTS

NEWS, REVIEWS, EVENTS, AND SO MUCH MORE!



Professor Chad taught Dr. Melba Vélez-Ortiz so many important lessons, not the least of which is how to enjoy simple things like sunshine on an autumn day.

Professor Chad

Dr. Melba Vélez-Ortiz likes to say that her guide dog, Chad, has a “dogtorate” in unconditional love and service—something that has changed her life.

The 51-year-old communications professor at Grand Valley State University

in Grand Rapids, Michigan, learned to be “terrified” of dogs when she was growing up in Puerto Rico. Her mother was bitten by a stray dog as a child and taught her children to fear canines.

But when a therapist began helping Vélez-Ortiz navigate vision loss from a rare, incurable condition called retinitis

pigmentosa, she suggested getting a guide dog from the nonprofit Guide Dogs for the Blind. Despite her lifelong fear of dogs, Vélez-Ortiz took a leap of faith and partnered with Chad, a yellow Labrador Retriever, in 2015.

“That is the best decision I’ve ever made,” she says.

AMANDA PITTS/UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS/COURTESY GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

Training together was initially challenging. When Vélez-Ortiz grew frustrated, the trainer explained that Chad didn't know what to do with her anger—what he needed was instruction because he wanted to do better.

“I got to thinking, ‘What if my students are the same way?’”

She applied that lesson to her teaching methods while learning to put her life in the lovable Lab's paws each day, crossing streets and riding buses to get to work on time. He helps her call on students since she can't see when they raise their hands, and helps students stay open and engaged during lessons while decreasing their stress—particularly during the pandemic.

“Professor Chad” joined Vélez-Ortiz onstage at her tenure ceremony to thunderous applause. After seven years of “teaching,” he has a perfect score from grateful students on ratemyprofessors.com.

“Chad has something to teach my students that is uncanny, and that is unconditional love, and how to serve with joy and with lots of pride,” she says.

He's also taught her patience, to not be judgmental, and to take time to pause and enjoy simple pleasures like sitting in the grass to listen to birds and feel the breeze. The social dog gets her out and about, and lowers her blood pressure in a way using her cane never does.

Ultimately, he taught her to feel that nothing is impossible. Vélez-Ortiz is immensely grateful for all the lessons she's learned from Chad.

“He's helped me to be not just a better teacher, but a better person,” she says. “He's a superstar.” —Jen Reeder

Visit Guide Dogs for the Blind online at guidedogs.com.



The year AKC Family Dog magazine launched. In its two decades, the award-winning bimonthly publication has offered readers thousands of helpful tips, heartwarming stories, and awe-inspiring images. Even more important, the bimonthly publication has given dogs all over America a colorful object to fetch from the mailbox.

Brilliant Noses, Brave Souls

K-9 Barrett of the Montville Police Department, in Connecticut, suffered serious on-the-job injuries in December 2021, but that didn't keep him down. After recovery, the German Shepherd Dog returned to his job. For his devotion, skill, and bravery, Barrett, now 6 1/2 years old, is one of the recipients of the 2023 AKC DOG-NY



2023 Paw of Courage Award.

These awards recognize dogs who serve their communities honorably, including police K-9s, and military working dogs.

Barrett was holding an armed felon by the leg when his captive started punching the dog's head. The attack left Barrett with an injury that caused seizures but he continued to serve the community until his retirement this year.

Another Paw of Courage award went to K-9 Ivanka, a 4-year-old German Shepherd Dog who is certified through the American Working Dog Association in human-remains detection. She and handler Stephanie Baker, who are volunteers with Northwest Indiana K9 Search and Recovery, have assisted the ATF, local law enforcement, firefighters, and more in the past year alone.



K-9 Barrett and Handler Officer Witts