



In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder

# Professor Paws

Yellow Lab joins faculty of University of Oklahoma-Tulsa

Dr. Keven Rudeen, Dean of the College of Allied Health, hands Niko his diploma during graduation ceremonies. (Photos courtesy of OU-Tulsa)

**O**n May 9, 2017, a yellow Lab named Niko walked onto the stage at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa's graduation ceremony while wearing a cap and gown. He shook hands with the Dean of the College of Allied Health and gingerly took his "dogtorate" degree in his mouth.

An audience of over 5,000 people shared a collective "Awww."

While the moment was adorable, it was also notable: Niko will be the university's first full-time canine professor, and at the time of writing, he's considered the only one in the country. The City of Tulsa even declared "Professor Paws Day" in his honor on May 9.

The "Professor Paws" project is the brainchild of Mary Isaacson, EdD, associate professor of occupational therapy at OU-Tulsa. After training a yellow Lab named Samson as a service dog for a

student with cerebral palsy, she realized how beneficial service dogs can be not only to assist people with disabilities, but to teach students about the ways specially trained dogs can help. She fundraised for a puppy, and in August of 2013, when Niko was just eight weeks old, he started coming with her to work. "Integrating a dog that's going to be in public a lot, you start young," she said. "I had people on the campus who would say, 'I'll puppyisit Niko!' He's been very embraced."

Niko thrived in his puppy obedience classes and learned



quickly – he’s both treat- and toy-motivated. Now he’s highly trained in numerous service dog skills and specializes in demonstrating how service dogs can assist people with mobility issues. He can turn lights on and off, push the handicapped-accessible button to open automatic doors, retrieve items from the refrigerator or elsewhere, and help pull socks off. In demonstrations, Isaacson will drop a phone as she falls to the floor; Niko will bring her the phone and then position himself to assist her to stand, and showcase other skills.

“It’s not just a PowerPoint where we’re talking about it, it’s actually a live demonstration, which really makes a difference,” she said. “It creates that ‘a-ha’ moment.”

Niko has appeared not just in classes for nursing, physical therapy, and occupational therapy students, but at schools, hospitals, and the nonprofit Center for Individuals with Physical Challenges. While Niko snoozes at her feet, Isaacson discusses the different types of service dogs, the differences between service dogs and therapy dogs, laws surrounding service dogs,

and resources for people who would like to have one. When it’s time for another demonstration, he pops up his head, alert and ready to show off – he’s a bit of a ham. “He’s loved by all,” she said.

Niko has lots of chances to step out of his vest and “just be a dog,” too. He plays ball with other faculty members and carries mail from office to office. He visits with medical students before exams; in a survey, the students indicated that being with Niko helped decrease their stress.

Isaacson said she wanted to get a Lab for the “Professor Paws” program not just because Labs are a traditional choice for service dogs, but because retrieving is a key part of the job, Labs require less grooming than golden retrievers, and she’s “definitely a Lab lover.” Niko adored her chocolate Lab, Hershey, until the elderly dog passed away. At home, Niko likes to swim in her pool and snuggle.

“I think because Niko does so many things and he works, his mind is occupied so he’s never been a dog that gets into trouble as far as chewing up shoes or any of those kind of things,” she said. “He’s really a good dog.”

Recent OU-Tulsa graduate Meredith Wyatt sat next to Niko at the graduation ceremony; she graduated with a Master’s degree in occupational therapy and was Isaacson’s graduate assistant for several years, so she spent a lot of time with Niko in presentations and training classes. She said graduating on the same day Niko received his “dogtorate” degree “put a bow on top of the whole experience.”

“It was a proud moment,” she recalled. “Niko has been a part of my career at OU-Tulsa for the three years that I was there.

She said audiences were often amazed by witnessing Niko’s transformation from attentive working dog – “in his vest, he is all business” – to a typical, happy Lab when off-duty.

“Once we remove the vest, he is a bouncy, playful pup,” she said. “He loves to go around and visit audience members, give kisses to people, or participate in his favorite pastime: playing fetch.”

She said Niko was a bit of a celebrity on campus, and students would call out to him when she walked him around the grounds or



Niko pulls off Mary Isaacson’s sock during a demo. (Photos courtesy of OU-Tulsa)



Niko open's a door for (from left to right) Mary Isaacson; Meredith Wyatt, OT student (now a graduate); and Caitlin Pottorf, OT. (Photos courtesy of OU-Tulsa)

pose for pictures with him. "He is just a beautiful Lab, and he loves being in front of people."

Now she's starting work as an occupational therapist at an inpatient rehab facility, where patients train to go home after a hospitalization for a broken hip, amputation, or stroke. She said the administration hopes to introduce a "facility dog" to help motivate people to participate in their rehabilitation.

"Say somebody needs to work on their hand coordination. They could brush the dog, or throw a ball for the dog, things like that," she explained. "I'm really excited about it, because I feel pretty prepared to help with that after my experience with Niko."

Amanda Murphy, director of communications at OU-Tulsa, said she and her colleagues love playing ball with Niko in the hallways of the President's Office. They're also proud of the service he provides to students and the community, and to offer a

cutting-edge program that could be adopted by other institutions.

"There's something in the heart of Tulsans of doing everything bigger and better. So I think the Professor Paws project is right in line of, 'We're going to go big or go home, and we're going to set national trends.' This program is hopefully leading the way as an idea generator for the rest of the country," she said. "From a university standpoint, it's been amazing and inspiring. Everybody on campus just adores Niko."



lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at [www.JenReeder.com](http://www.JenReeder.com).

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a



Niko works with Caitlin Pottorf by showing how a service dog can help with transfers through bracing. (Photos courtesy of OU-Tulsa)