

Service Animals Bring Smiles to Handlers and Students



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Sometimes, all it takes is a furry friend to brighten a person’s day. At Pepperdine, there are plenty of opportunities to encounter service and therapy animals around campus, who help their handlers in day-to-day life.

It’s important for students around campus who are not familiar with the many distinctive practices and behaviors of service and therapy animals to understand how to properly interact with these animals, according to Guide Dogs of America.

Maria Arguelles and Nala the Yellow Labrador



Senior Maria Arguelles and her 4-year-old service animal Nala work as a team to combat the medical ailments Arguelles sustained after she was involved in an accident that left her with a severe concussion and brain injury. After exploring several forms of treatment for her injuries, Arguelles said she sought out support to aid in transitioning from living at home during high school to living alone at college.

“I learned that service dogs could predict incoming seizures or if you’re going to pass out,” Arguelles said. “They can alert you before even your body can recognize that.”

Nala learned to recognize different chemical scents released before her handler falls ill, alongside her public access training.

Given her symptoms, Arguelles said owning a service animal seemed like a great match to help her take care of herself while she learned to manage her new condition and way of life.

“If she knows she has her vest on, and we’re in public, she knows there’s this certain

expectation of how she’s supposed to behave,” Arguelles said. “She has a much calmer demeanor and isn’t trying to say hi to everyone, but when the vest comes off, she’ll immediately get zoomies and be more energetic.”

Arguelles said she usually receives attention from people around campus when she is with Nala and frequently stops, so she must set aside more time to get her from one place to the next.

“While it’s easy to meet people when you have a pet, it’s hard sometimes because you are almost seen as just the girl with the dog,” Arguelles said.

Sometimes, having her service animal around makes her more outgoing and able to connect with more people, while other times, people conflate Nala and Arguelles as one unit rather than separate beings, Arguelles said.

Arguelles said this sentiment can be frustrating when she encounters people who only greet Nala and don’t acknowledge her presence. She wants students to be educated about how they’re supposed to behave around support animals and their handlers.

Caroline Speed and Ollie the Mini Goldendoodle



Junior Caroline Speed brings her 3-year-old mini Goldendoodle, Ollie, to class to help with her panic disorder. While Ollie started as an emotional support animal during her last year of high school, she eventually had him trained further to aid her with psychiatric care.

“He’s been very invaluable to my life,” Speed said. “He’s amazing.”

Routine is very important for Speed as sometimes, her mental health makes it difficult to pull off even simple tasks. However, Ollie impels her to get out of bed and go out into



Liam Zieg | Assistant Photo Editor

Senior Maria Arguelles and her service dog Nala smile together on the lawn at Alumni Park on March 25. Maria said she has worked and grown with Nala since she was 8 weeks old.

the world.

While Ollie keeps Speed company, she said he also helps out the community around him.

“He helps everyone around me, which is really nice because a lot of people don’t have the time to take care of a dog because it’s a big commitment and responsibility,” Speed said. “Sometimes, just seeing a dog and getting a tail wag makes people really happy.”

Ollie is trained to help Speed with her panic disorder, specifically concerning panic attacks as he can sense when attacks are on the way.

“It’s really cool because while I was the one who trained him, a lot of his senses are very intuitive,” Speed said. “Animals are just so intelligent and oftentimes know things that even humans don’t know.”

Speed said Ollie helps her feel comfortable in public and de-escalates mental health situations.

“When he gets on the shuttle, he’ll stand and wait for the driver to pet him, and every morning, they do their little greeting,” Speed said. “He’s also really close with a lot of my friends, so he’ll cry and hug them and give them the biggest reactions.”

During difficult times on campus, Speed has opened him up to everybody and posted on Fizz that students can come to main campus and pet Ollie.

“There’s some pros and cons because sometimes people will just come up and touch him without asking, but I generally like how he makes everybody smile,” Speed said. “It’s so great having a little being smiling up at you, wagging their tail — even when they don’t know you, I think it’s very beneficial.”



Elizabeth Pode and Edge the Yellow Labrador



As a Career Coach at Pepperdine’s Graziadio Business School, Elizabeth Pode and her 4-year-old service dog, Edge, work as a team together in every sphere of life.

Pode deals with cerebral palsy and has had the opportunity to utilize service animals in the past for movement assistance, she said. When Pode’s previous service dog, Riot, passed away in 2021, she went through a lengthy application process and finally received Edge through the nonprofit Canine Companions in 2022.

“It takes a lot of time, energy and money to train a service dog,” Pode said. “So, even though I felt confident doing so, I didn’t have the emotional capacity to do it all over again.”

Pode said her neurological disorder manifests in poor balance, low muscle tone and poor muscle elasticity. Edge acts as a mobility dog, typically assisting Pode with all her physical mobility tasks.

Pode uses a walker on a day-to-day basis as she needs it for stability and cannot walk far without it, she said. If, for some reason, she is ever separated from the walker, Edge is trained to retrieve it.

Similarly, Pode said Edge is great at picking up items that may fall away from her accidentally, alongside opening doors and pushing buttons.

Though service dogs do not require official certification statewide or federally, some other countries require minimum certification, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act. Pode said Edge received public access training so he could act appropriately while in public.

Edge is great at matching her energy and is a vibrant member of Drescher’s campus life, Pode said. He has two Golden Retriever therapy dog friends from a local organization called Love on a Leash and frequently visits Pepperdine’s campus during finals week.

“He definitely de-stresses everyone,” Pode said. “I have students who come in upset that they didn’t get a job, and they can come pet him. I know the staff really loves him, and he’s been great all around.”



Pode said she has integrated Edge into multiple events on campus and even filmed a promotional video for Graziadio’s Career Center, in which he starred as the lead.

Pode said while having a service animal while disabled can be helpful, sometimes, there are other methods of support for those with disabilities that may fit better with their needs and lifestyle.

“There’s lots of factors that go into having a dog with you 24/7, and while it sounds fun and is fun, you have to look at your own life and what you do to see if having a service animal works for you,” Pode said.

