

Professors Participate in '4 Paws For Ability'

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As students walk through the snow this season, they are likely to see more than just shoe prints on the sidewalks. Service dogs are now leaving their paw prints alongside those shoe patterns as MU continues its trial in the university training program "4 Paws For Ability." Upon completing their training, these dogs will be matched with children with exceptional needs and will perform duties ranging from autism assistance to seizure assistance.

Many will remember Professor Mary Lahman of communication studies leading Etsy, an English golden retriever service pup, around campus and down the halls during fall 2014. Etsy came to Manchester at the age of six months—approximately three and a half in human-years—to begin what Lahman calls Manchester's "first class of puppies with ability and conviction," to echo Manchester's Mission Statement. Similar to the age ratio between dogs and humans, service dogs enrolled in the university training program are expected to graduate in a short three months compared to the typical four-year college experience for humans.

Though Etsy has "graduated" and returned to the "4 Paws For Ability" headquarters in Xenia, Ohio, she has left behind



PUPPIES OF ABILITY AND CONVICTION Professor Mary Lahman poses for a photo with Saks, a six-month-old golden lab that she is currently fostering for the "4 Paws For Ability" university training program. The program trains puppies for three months to become service dogs for children with exceptional needs. Professor Sreenath Majumder is also fostering a service pup this semester, a three-month-old golden retriever named Avril.

Photo by Savannah Riley

a legacy. "University students exclaimed that you 'made their day' and that their hearts 'leaped with joy' when you approached them in the hallway," Lahman wrote in her blog post (composed in a letter format) to Etsy. "Many would just get on the floor with you and nuzzle in your fur, as if drawing strength from you. One elementary student, upon learning that you would help a family, exclaimed that you might be coming to his house because his dad needed

help." While Lahman acknowledged her tears and longing for Etsy's presence after they parted, she also described a "greater good" that motivated her to continue with the program. "You have great work to do," she wrote in her blog to Etsy, but noted that the responsibility belongs to others as well. "There is a huge need for people to help socialize these animals so that they can move on to their advanced training," Lahman said.

Following Etsy's example, a new class of service dogs has emerged at Manchester. Lahman is currently fostering Saks, a six-month-old golden lab and member of the "department store litter." Inspired by Lahman, Associate Professor of Economics, Sreenath Majumder adopted three-month-old golden retriever service pup Avril, named after Canadian singer-songwriter Avril Lavigne, only a few weeks ago.

Despite Lahman's

previous experiences with household pets and Etsy, she tried not to refer to those animals as much when she introduced Saks. "It's like comparing children or comparing students," she said. From an objective rather than evaluative standpoint, however, Lahman did describe Saks as being much more calm than Etsy was, citing her tennis elbow as evidence of Etsy's ability to "get up and go." She was also surprised to see how much more time Saks spends

sleeping.

Majumder, on the other hand, is a first-time pet owner and could not compare foster-pup Avril to another pet even if he wanted to. That being said, Majumder is quickly learning the ropes of pet parenthood. "Avril is very loving," he said, "but she is like a human baby—she cannot speak—and I have to understand what her feelings are." Continuing the baby comparison, he later added: "For the last week and a half, the most common words to come out of my mouth have been 'No, Avril, no.'"

Majumder recalled a recent incident when he was leaving a voicemail for an insurance agent, and Avril starting getting into things in his office. "I had to end the call, and when the lady called back she said, 'you didn't say anything to me; you just started talking to someone else, saying no, Avril, no.'"

In the time it had taken Majumder to tell this story, Avril had found a pack of tissues and was quietly ripping them apart at his feet. Majumder bent over in his office chair to clean up, and when he turned his head from the trash can back to the remaining tissue bits, Avril embraced her "retriever" breeding and stuck her head into the bin, creating yet another mess.

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Many dog owners, especially those raising puppies, may sympathize with Majumder and remember their own frustrations with all-too-curious canines, but training a service dog is different from raising a domestic pet. “Your time is not your own,”

Lahman said. “It’s a constant negotiation when you wake up. You find yourself thinking ‘Here’s my day, and now where does Saks fit into it?’ When people have pets, they usually share that duty with the family, but with a service dog, you are the primary

handler. That means you will figure out how to get around with this dog, how to use the restroom, how to navigate stairs, and how to go to a restaurant or the grocery store. It really teaches us about ability.”

Despite the challenges and headaches,

training both of these pups contains an extra silver lining. Both Lahman and Majumder described the joy that Saks and Avril bring to others as being the best part of the experience. “The way they can sense a child in the room is amazing,” Lahman said. “Their

ears perk up, and they are just ready to greet that child. They form a real connection whether it be with an eight year old or an 18 year old.”

Majumder described a similar connection that he sees every day. “For many faculty and

students, in the morning when Avril comes in and starts jumping on their laps is a great start to their day,” he said. “Avril brings happiness and positive feelings to the campus.”