

Mount St. Mary's welcomes professor's service dog

EMMITSBURG – To David Karn's accounting students at Mount St. Mary's University, everything seems perfectly normal. Duchess, his service dog, lays tucked behind his desk, unseen – just as she is supposed to be.

Karn called Duchess – three-quarters Golden Retriever and a quarter black Labrador Retriever – a “stunning animal.” She has a black, wavy coat, gentle eyes and calm, loving demeanor.

Duchess was paired with Karn through Canine Companions for Independence, the largest non-profit provider of assistance dogs in the United States, to assist with day-to-day tasks that are difficult for the professor, who has lupus and associated conditions.

Lupus is a systemic autoimmune disorder that has caused Karn to lose dexterity in his hands and left him with rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia and degenerative bone disease. All, for the most part, are unnoticeable.

“Invisible illnesses are one of the most misunderstood things on this planet,” Karn said.

A patch on Duchess' service vest reads “not all disabilities are visible.”

“She's a visual symbol of his disability,” said Mary Beth Graham, the Mount's associate dean of undergraduate business studies, adding that Duchess has benefit for others who have a disability or similar issue. “It allows them (the students) to see that there are other people who struggle.”

Karn was diagnosed with lupus in 2015. After he dropped a stylus in the middle of class – unable to write on a standard board, he uses a Surface tablet that projects on a screen – he wanted to increase his independence.

“Knowing what you have, you can attack it,” Karn said. “I'm going to do anything I

can in my power ... to feel better for my family.”

He applied to seven agencies for a service dog, and was approved by CCI after a rigorous application process. Karn, who had never owned a dog, attended two weeks of team training in November 2018 at CCI’s northeast training center in Medford, N.Y.

It involved work with dogs, lectures, quizzes and a textbook, all, according to Karn, engaging and fun. He called the CCI staff “match whisperers,” and it was an emotional moment when the human and dog pairings were announced in his class of 13. Since 1975, CCI has graduated more than 6,000 teams.

“This is truly life altering,” Karn said. “If you have a debilitating illness, this can drastically change your life.”

Duchess picks up items that Karn has dropped, pushes the handicap button to open motorized doors. She can help him get dressed and undressed, *and* assist with laundry by placing items in machines and removing them. Among her commands is “soda,” which directs her to open the refrigerator and fetch a bottle.

Duchess accompanies Karn, a big hockey fan, to Washington Capitals games, decked out, of course, with a Caps collar. As a team, they are always working on new tasks, such as learning the difference between his office and classroom.

“She’s just an extension of me,” Karn said. “I know that she has my back at all times. ... Any time I’ve called on her, she’s been there.”

Karn teaches at the Mount two days per week, along with two classes online. He said the university has been 100 percent supportive of adding Duchess to the community – even giving her a personalized Mount ID card.

He is a Mount alumnus, earning a bachelor’s degree in accounting and theology in 1997 and an MBA with a concentration in non-profit management in 1999. This is his fourth year teaching there full time.

He has great support from his wife, Jennifer, and their children, Noah, 14, and Emma, 10. Jennifer has taught at St. Mary Catholic School in Hagerstown since

2001, and was featured in the September issue of the Catholic Review as an Archdiocese of Baltimore Teacher of the Year.

If Karn is having a bad day, he said, Duchess' emotional support is as important as her physical support. Systemic disorders can be draining on the entire body, causing chronic pain and emotional exhaustion.

"The dog obviously is based for service, but there is a therapeutic aspect, too," Karn said. "She can provide me what medicine can't."