

Man's best friend

Freshman Nathan Selove has special bond with his disability dog Sylvia



HOLLY WARFIELD / THE BREEZE

Sylvia, an autism service dog, has helped Nathan Selove cope with his Asperger's syndrome since he was in seventh grade.

By LAUREN HUNT
The Breeze

The Quad is the land of the dogs when it's warm. Most people let you pet and sometimes even pick up and snuggle their puppies. But there's one dog out all year round that you can't pet — she's on the clock. Her name is Sylvia and she's an autism service dog.

Nathan Selove, a freshman communication studies and theatre double major, was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a form of high-functioning autism, at the age of 9. The summer before Selove started seventh grade he got Sylvia from Susquehanna Service Dogs in Harrisburg, Pa.

"She helps me out through deep pressure therapy — basically if I'm starting an 'aspy-meltdown,' she'll, like, get on my lap and the pressure helps to soothe me and calm me down," Selove said. "Sometimes if I'm in a crowd, she'll actually block people. I'll get to a wall and she'll stand in front of me to block them."

Selove was severely bullied in elementary school and his parents feared that it would be worse in middle school, and it was. When Selove announced to his class that he would not be in school for the last week of the sixth grade to train with Sylvia, his class cheered.

"The bullying was really, really bad before I had her. It started when I was in the fourth grade and it just got worse and worse," Selove said. "And then, here comes Sylvia and suddenly everyone realizes, 'Oh, maybe we shouldn't have been so hard on Nathan. Maybe he can't help it.'"

But bullying was not the only problem Selove and his family would face. Getting Sylvia into middle school with him proved to be another challenge.

The school board argued that the Americans with Disabilities Act did not apply to Selove. Eventually the board presented Selove and his family with a contract stating that he could bring Sylvia to school but she could not ride the bus, and the board reserved the right to remove Sylvia at any time for any reason.

Selove's family was not thrilled with the contract but signed under duress so that Selove could return to school with Sylvia.

Then, in 2008, Virginia Delegate Mark Cole wrote a bill requiring schools to accommodate service dogs and it passed unanimously in the state legislature as well as in every committee it was sent to. It was also signed by then-Governor Tim Kaine.

Selove's family then demanded that the contract be annulled, and it was.

DOG | 'She's better than some students – she doesn't have a cell phone.'

from front

Selove was allowed to ride the school bus with Sylvia, until the school board found a student on the bus who was allergic to dogs. The school board then banned Sylvia from the bus once again, despite the fact that the student was already on medication for her allergy and the ADA forbids the discrimination of service dogs because of allergies.

This conflict continued until Nathan got to high school, where the school administration was much more welcoming to Sylvia. By the time Selove was a freshman, his battle with bullying was practically over; the bullying had almost completely subsided and his academic performance improved significantly.

"It has been a miracle," Nathan's mother, Shellie Selove, said. "We did not expect that a service dog would have such an enormous impact on his life and the lives of our family."

JMU greeted Nathan and Sylvia with the same welcoming attitude.

"JMU is very much about diversity, so when we contacted Disability Services they were very open," Selove said. "They were very welcoming and very accommodating."

While Selove is hardly the first student to have a service dog accompany him to class, service dogs are not usually an option pursued by people who have Asperger's.

"I'm hoping that it's going to become more common in the next

few years," Selove said. "I'm not the only one in the U.S. There aren't a lot of people [who have service dogs for Asperger's] but there are quite a few. It's a relatively new method."

Although Sylvia and autism service dogs are new to JMU, there was already a policy in place that allowed service dogs on campus.

Policy 1330 defines a handler as "a person with a disability who is the owner and user of a service animal," with a service animal being "any animal trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of and to accommodate the functional needs of an individual with a disability." The policy allows a service dog in almost any area that the handler is allowed to be.

The professors have also been welcoming to Sylvia. Jorge Nieto, a Spanish professor, even includes Sylvia on his attendance roll.

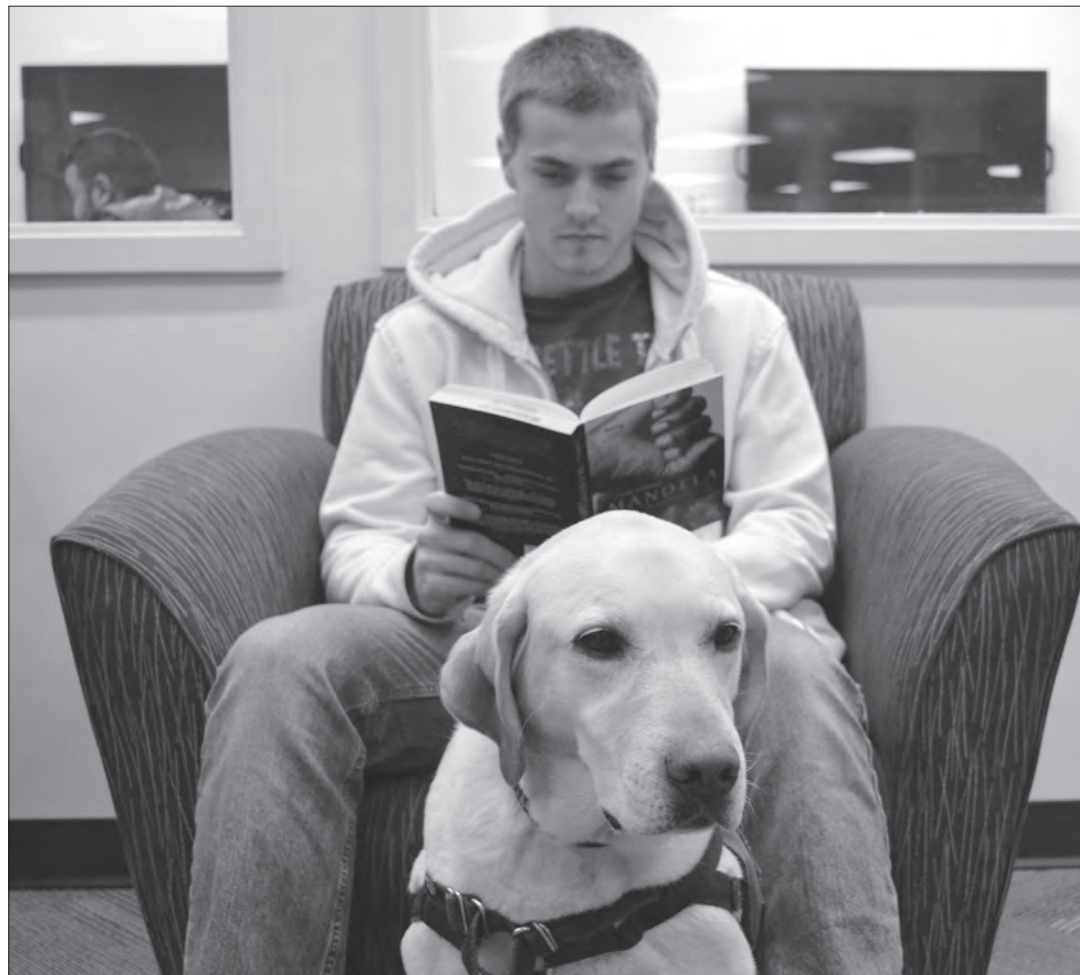
"Sylvia just lays down under his desk," Nieto said. "She never barks. She's better than some students — she doesn't have a cell phone."

Selove says that Sylvia played a huge roll in his decision and ability to attend JMU.

"Honestly, I don't think I could have come to a university if it weren't for her," Selove said. "Sylvia was really able to bring me out of my shell."

When asked to comment on her feelings toward her job, Sylvia responded with, "Woof."

CONTACT Lauren Hunt at huntle@dukes.jmu.edu.



HOLLY WARFIELD / THE BREEZE

Nathan Selove was often bullied when he was younger because he has Asperger's syndrome. He says Sylvia has changed that.