

Big Dogs on Campus

A fluffy, light brown dog with floppy ears is sitting on a wooden ledge. The dog is looking directly at the camera with a calm expression. It is wearing a black collar with a silver tag. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with stone arches.

COURTESY OF YALE LAW SCHOOL

Stressed
students check
out with furry
companions

BY MELANIE
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Visitors to the library at Yale Law School have surprisingly diverse professional backgrounds: marionette-maker, military officer, baker, model, and even magician. But it is safe to say there's only one former rat catcher walking the halls of this hallowed institution.

Monty is an 11-year-old Jack Russell-Border Terrier mix owned by librarian Julian Aiken. These days, he's a licensed therapy dog who provides comfort to law

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Study break. Third-year USF law student Joanna LiCalsi puts down the books for a petting session with Monk, a Saint Bernard. JOHN SHAFER

students stressed out by topics like torts and contracts, or simply going through TLC deprivation. But he started his life as a ratter.

"He grew up on a horse farm in England, in a stable, killing rats," Aiken

says. "He was clearly a working dog, so when we moved to a more urban environment, my family and I got him certified as a therapy dog."

In 2010, shortly after he arrived at Yale, Aiken came up with the idea to put



Moot mutt. Monty, a terrier, with Yale law librarian Julian Aiken. COURTESY OF YALE LAW SCHOOL

Monty to work. Over the winter, Monty became licensed in the U.S., and in March of this year, the school conducted

a three-day pilot program. During pre-exam time, students were able to “check out” the pooch for 30 minutes of cuddle and play time in Aiken’s office.

Law librarian Blair Kauffman sent an email to his charges explaining the program. “We hope that making a therapy dog available to our students will prove to be a positive addition to current services offered by the library,” he wrote. “It is well documented that visits from therapy dogs have resulted in increased happiness, calmness, and overall emotional well-being.”

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Canine counselor. Ronald Wheeler, director of the law library at USF, enjoys a relaxing moment with a visiting dog. JOHN SHAFER

One of the things Aiken remembers most about his own law school days two decades ago was missing his dog Gypsy, who lived with his parents. When he’d call

home, they would play Mozart's "Requiem" on the stereo, because it was guaranteed to make the pup howl—the closest Aiken and Gypsy had to a conversation.

"When I walk Monty around the grounds at Yale, he's been mobbed by people who say they miss their own dogs at home," he says. Monty was no less popular during his library sessions. During the three trial days, 84 students chilled with the canine during 27 sessions.

James Kwak, who lives in Amherst, Mass., and just graduated from Yale Law, signed up with some friends to visit Monty during the pilot in March. He says the break from studying was valuable. "Basically we pet him, fed him a few treats, cuddled, pet him some more and admired how cute he was," he says. "It was half an hour of blissful happiness and relaxation."

"The students would come in individually or in small groups, and they would just stroke his ears and give him cookies," Aiken says. "Therapy dogs are very comfortable with people and responsive to their needs. The feedback was extremely positive. It's made other law schools realize it's something worth investigating."

While professional pups remain an anomaly on campuses, their positive impact at a few universities provides convincing evidence that more dogs should be enrolled. They not only help students de-stress from academic pressures, but they can help those who suffer from homesickness, general anxiety or, in some cases, grief, trauma and depression.

Across the country, Ronald Wheeler, director of the law library at the University of San Francisco School of Law, read about the Yale program and

decided to start his own last spring. "I contacted the local SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) and went through the hierarchy here at the university, all the while thinking I wouldn't get approval," he says, "but everyone supported it."

Unlike Yale's arrangement with one dog-owning librarian, USF works with several volunteers and their certified dogs through SPCA's animal-assisted therapy (AAT) program, which arranges visits to places like nursing homes, hospitals, and now, a law library. At USF, the dogs were available two days a week during the two weeks of exams, and students signed up for 10 minute slots in the library's large basement lounge.

Wheeler says the time limit wasn't enforced, and many students brought friends. "I got the sense that students were more comfortable when they were with their peers," he says. "But I knew

with their peers,” he says. “But I knew this was worth it each time I went down there. Students were smiling and laughing, and their minds weren’t at all on their exams.”

The atmosphere during exam time, Wheeler says, is “palpably more tense” and people are less considerate — not smiling, not saying “good morning” and even less well groomed. “They look like they haven’t shaved or showered in a few days,” he says. But flawless hygiene is not high on the list of concerns for most

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Third-year USF law student Joanna LiCalsi says hanging with the hounds was “literally the only fun or exciting thing going on in the midst of exam hell.” She spent time with three of the dogs but was particularly fond of Monk, a Saint Bernard.

“I lost all sense of time and sat with him for over 45 minutes and kept wishing I could’ve stayed longer,” she says. Her time with Monk allowed her to stop obsessing over her exams for a short time. “That’s the thing about exam time in law school,” she says. “Even if you go out to have some dinner, take a cigarette break, go for a walk, nothing really takes your mind off of the stress. Being able to go back to my island in the library with a

smile on my face and dog hair on my pants was a welcome change.”

While there is nary a claim that the dogs are helping students score better on their exams, Wheeler expects there will be some long-term benefits.

“There are so many studies that show that practicing lawyers have high rates of alcoholism and all sorts of ailments related to stress,” he says, “so hopefully this will teach students that hanging out with four-legged friends is one of the healthy ways to deal with stress.” In the meantime, the dogs will make regular visits to the library during exams at the end of each semester.

Dogs have been equally supportive on other campuses. At the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, a five-year-old fawn-colored boxer named Sherman provides comfort to students at the counseling center. The pup belongs to Kim Charniak, a clinical social worker, who schedules

a clinical social worker, who schedules him with about five or six students a day, twice a week.

The boxer assists students who have experienced trauma, anxiety, depression or life-changing events. They are typically referred to Charniak by their regular therapists. She reports that having Sherman present in her therapy sessions (they work as a team) helps speed the therapy process by creating a more relaxed environment for students and helping clients focus on tasks. He also helps them develop skills such as empathy, nurturing and responsibility.

Sherman joined the staff in January after Charniak approached the center director about starting an animal-assisted therapy program. According to the school, it's the only university in the country that has such a program integrated into the treatment process.

"Sherman helps clients feel comfortable

and supported while they work through some very difficult issues," Charniak says. "He is a valuable asset because he can model the balance between asking for help, accepting help, and helping others." And just like other counseling center staff members, Sherman has to prepare for his job, which includes getting his teeth brushed, ears cleaned and paws wiped before meeting clients.

Now that Yale has gathered student feedback from Monty's spring stint, the school has decided to make him a permanent part of the two-week reading period before exams. Aiken says he might make some other special appearances during a semester, but stresses that the library is generally a pet-free facility.

During his downtime, the little Brit has kept himself busy with an active social schedule. In the spring, he was invited to the law school commencement and was

the law school commencement and was voted the law school's prom king. Aiken concurs that his dog has a pretty good life these days, both socially and professionally. "Being fed cookies by Yale law students," he says. "I'd say it's a step up from killing rats in a stable." ■