

Therapy and bomb-sniffing dog brings comfort and security to campus

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Sgt. Vincent Silva of the Tulane University Police Department, center, invites students to play with Officer Max, TUPD's highly trained therapy dog. (Photo by Sabree Hill)

Vincent Silva may have one of the more unusual co-workers on Tulane's campuses.

A sergeant with the Tulane University Police Department, Silva is the handler for K9 Officer Max, a highly trained service dog who is as adept at sniffing for explosives as

he is at providing comfort to stressed-out students.

Everywhere Silva goes, you can bet that Max is right by his side. Together, they are a team, playing a crucial role in campus security but always finding time to bring smiles – and petting opportunities – to their ever-growing fandom.

Max and Silva sightings abound, with the two making appearances at football games, campus events and residence halls. This week, they could be found at study halls, giving students a much-needed break from the stress of finals.

A simple stroll along McAlister Way attracts throngs of students headed for class. Max now has his own Instagram page, run by Capt. Anthony Dominguez, where he can be seen savoring a PJ's pup cup, sniffing for contraband around Yulman Stadium, getting fitted for new attire at the bookstore or greeting this year's crop of first-year students.

When the workday ends, Max heads home with Silva. He is part of Silva's family, from sunrise to sunset.

"Everywhere I go, he goes. If we're answering calls, he's coming with me. At the end of the day, we're back in the car and heading home. It's like he's my own therapy dog."

But Max, a 3-year-old Labrador retriever, is far more than a companion for Silva. He arrived on campus in June 2023, having been trained to serve two of the most crucial jobs at Tulane – detecting specific odors that could lead to explosives or explosive materials and to provide emotional support to students experiencing depression or other mental challenges.

"He can sniff out numerous odors when it comes to explosives, any kind of synthetics," Silva said. "We do sweeps at (Yulman Stadium) the day before a game as well as the day of the game. So, if there's anything suspicious, his nose will find it. Their sense of smell is 100 times stronger than ours. His nose will find a scent before any of us would ever even know it was there."

Once the serious stuff is out of the way, Silva and Max move on to more pleasant activities. On any given game day, the pair can be spotted holding court near the

front of Yulman Stadium, drawing throngs of dog lovers eager to pet and pose with him. Silva said Max's calm demeanor and easygoing attitude make for engaging interactions.

"Even when I'm walking on campus, I can hear people from across the quad hollering 'Max!' Max!' They're screaming for him," Silva said. "Everybody wants to pet him. Everybody wants to play with him. His temperament and attitude are so calm and gentle, no matter where I take him."

Those qualities are especially crucial when Max is called on to serve in his therapy role, providing stress release and comfort to students.

Those are the kinds of encounters that Silva said make his job so rewarding. "You can go home at night and say, 'Hey, we were able to help this person.'"

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Sgt. Vincent Silva of the Tulane University Police Department