

## JMU's biggest fan

BY SARAH CHASE ('17), *communications and marketing coordinator, alumni relations*

**T**yler Hansen ('17) and Ryan Nickel ('17) received an email sent to new freshman students encouraging them to "Apply to be Duke Dog" and both figured, "Why not?" While the application process was fun and they were thrilled to embody JMU's mascot, neither of them knew the lifelong impact that their friend, Duke Dog, would have on their lives.

"Duke Dog gives me the incredible ability to put on a cape and a mask and essentially be a superhero," Hansen says. "My super power is that I get to make people smile. I get to bring joy. I can't do that as Tyler Hansen. But Duke Dog can. And it's an incredible gift to be able to give."

"Duke Dog sees JMU at its best," Nickel says. "It's a unique experience to see campus through Duke Dog's eyes because everyone is coming together to cheer about something they all have in common." To fully embody Duke Dog, Nickel channeled his passion—"passion for JMU and passion for what it has built and passion for what it is doing," he says. For Nickel, that passion made it easy to be driven and excited every time he donned Duke Dog's persona.

Duke Dog's namesake is the university's second president, Samuel Page Duke. The first men's basketball team named themselves after Duke to commemorate him for providing the necessary equipment to get the team started. When the Dukes decided they needed a mascot, it was Ray Sonner, the director of public affairs at the time, who proposed the idea of an English bulldog. The name "Duke" is a reference to British royalty, so it made sense to have their stereotypical pet as a mascot. The first appearance of Duke Dog was a cartoon in 1972, followed shortly thereafter by a purebred English bulldog who belonged to professor Henry Myers. While Duke Dog has not been here since the inception of the university (his first appearance as the Duke Dog we know today was Nov. 28, 1982), one thing is clear: It feels like he has always been in the community.

When asked if there was one thing that everyone should know about Duke Dog, Hansen shared, "I wish people knew Duke Dog

was all bark and no bite. He's there for fun. He's friendly and interested in everyone." Hansen's favorite memory with Duke Dog took place during a football game at the College of William & Mary. At this particular game, he decided to sit with a 70-year-old man with mental disabilities for almost the entire game. At the end, the man's caretaker said that normally the man was terrified of loud noises and uneasy during games, but Duke Dog's presence made the older man feel at ease so he could enjoy the game. Hansen couldn't have been more touched. "That's the effect Duke Dog has on others."

During his time as Duke Dog, Nickel learned, "No act of kindness or outpouring of joy goes unappreciated. I definitely got tired and overwhelmed, and sometimes the crowd was really difficult, but I reminded myself that Duke Dog represented JMU and that energy was never wasted. I think that's something I still strive to do."

Similarly, Hansen feels that Duke Dog shaped his Madison Experience and gave him the opportunity to leave his mark on Madison.

"When I left, I felt like I impacted this campus ... but anonymously because not many people knew who I was. I got to impact people with Duke Dog, and that's something I'll take with me the rest of my life."

Classmates might not have known Hansen was

Duke Dog while he was a student, but his secret was revealed at graduation. Over the years, it has become tradition for graduating Duke Dogs to reveal their identities by wearing their paws with their graduation robes at commencement. For Hansen, "It was the best thing to wear Duke Dog's paws and shake (President) Alger's hand as I received my diploma."

The larger-than-life persona of Duke Dog wouldn't be possible without the students who carry on his legacy and message. The students who have the privilege to embody Duke Dog come and go, but one thing is certain: Duke Dog will always be JMU's biggest fan. 🐾



**(Above): President Jonathan R. Alger with his pal, Duke Dog, at the national championship football game in Frisco, Texas. (Right): Duke Dog Tyler Hansen poses with JMU cheerleaders before the national championship kickoff in Frisco.**

