Ignore Me: A Letter to the Public About Service Dog Etiquette

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol25/iss1/11

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IGNORE ME:
A LETTER TO THE PUBLIC ABOUT SERVICE DOG ETIQUETTE

Ginger Star Peterman
You may have noticed me prancing down the Syracuse University quad, moving through the university’s hallways and public spaces. There are so many of you and so few of us. Compared to you, we’re short; we have a lot more hair and bad breath. My name is Puma. My job is to take care of my human, Ginger. We are an inseparable team.

Please don’t approach or stare at me. I can see you. My ancestors, the wolves, taught me that eye contact is a considerable threat. I can sense awkwardness in your foreign emotion, whether fear or infatuation. I must alert my handler that someone is attempting to invade our personal space, “Woof! Woof!” [Ginger, I don’t feel safe right now, you must not feel safe either.]

Ginger needs me to stay by her side and watch her back. For good reason, she is never alone. She maintains an uncomfortable situational awareness. When I bark, Ginger is actively triggered—she feels terrible, literally nauseous that I scared away a likely curious and friendly person.

To maintain control of me in public is a difficult task for Ginger because public knowledge of service dog etiquette is lacking. To accomplish it, we are going to need to ask a favor of you. Please, share our story with members of your community to encourage growth of public spaces that are more welcoming to service animals and our handlers.

Basic rules of etiquette:
1. Ignore me. Don’t stare at me; you are a stranger.
2. Keep your distance.
3. Approach my handler, the one I’m tethered to with a leather lead wrapped around her torso.
4. I’m not a pet, nor am I your pet. Please don’t even ask to pet me.

When you meet someone’s pet, these rules do not apply. In fact, these behaviors may be welcomed, or even encouraged, in American pet culture. However, these same behaviors create a major disturbance for a service dog team, sometimes prohibiting us from performing our invisible tasks together.

When I am unable to perform, I get corrected by a very activated version of Ginger. I feel ashamed for misbehaving, and it’s not my fault that my attention was taken by you in ignorance. I have one job: to be attentively focused by staying attached to Ginger, within a three-foot radius, every second of every day for my entire life—to help Ginger achieve her local and global maximums of capability.

If you haven’t yet visited our home, then you might not be part of the pack (another thing I picked up from my ancestors). In this case, I will physically “block” you from approaching Ginger. Furthermore, if she is unaware of your presence, or otherwise engaged, I will audibly warn her—“Bark, Bark!”—that there is a potential danger approaching. At least, to me there is.

Since we are in a public setting, as when most encounters with service dogs occur, Ginger is likely busy. So, please consider leaving us to our business with one less upset to the already “Ruff!” day. You see, service dogs are never separated from our handlers. Not in a restaurant. Not on a plane. Not in a hotel.

We work to perform functions for individuals with disabilities. In some cases, we are, quite literally, a person’s eyes. Some
service dog’s daily tasks may include guiding their handler safely through doors, across streets, and away from steep cliffs or random ledges near bodies of water—preventing disorientation, injury, or death. In other cases, a service dog can be trained to smell when their handler’s blood sugar is off and alert them to check their levels and administer insulin or intake sugar—a life-saving situation for a Type I diabetic. I come from a family of medical service dogs from K9s For Warriors who are trained to block, cover, and brace for military veterans. In reality though, I do so much more than perform these simple tasks. I enable Ginger to get out of bed every morning by waking her with my ritualistic, slobbery kisses. I empower her to traverse the Syracuse University campus and sit in her own backyard without her getting the desire to run back inside and lock herself in, where it is safe, where there is order, where there is no possibility of public interaction.

For people, like my Ginger, who suffer non-obvious disabilities, like epilepsy or Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) as a result of Military Sexual Trauma (MST), a service dog’s purpose may be misunderstood or even worse—questioned.

Let me ask you something: Would you be willing to explain your personal and medical history to each person you walk past without first engaging in a proper introduction? Would you even be so inclined to introduce yourself to Ginger had you not first noticed me attached to her? Probably not. So, despite your curiosity, it is not polite to ask Ginger why she needs me, tell Ginger that she looks great for being disabled, or explain to us that your cousin’s step-sister’s best friend has a Chihuahua who looks just like me, but smaller.

If you are unsure whether or not you are encountering a service dog, there are a few tells: We are allowed in public places where pets are prohibited from entering; we usually wear a vest (I have one with patches which reads “SERVICE DOG, DO NOT PET,” but a lot of people must not be able to read. “Grrrr!”) And we behave so well that you may not immediately notice us. At times, I surprise servers as I get up from under the restaurant dining table because they have no idea I’m there. Furthermore, if a service dog-identifying patch is visible, the dog is not in training, so there is no need to ask the handler if he or she is training their service dog for a real disabled person.

With your assistance, we can encourage post-traumatic growth away from the disorder by knowing our rules of service dog etiquette before we approach Ginger with a handshake in the Syracuse Orange community, where she is a doctoral candidate pursuing multidisciplinary development of Solo, a medical device to aid veterans with PTSD.

Respectfully,

Puma (and Ginger, the human)