

# MEET JESSICA ST. JOHN



From Iraq to Afghanistan to Iowa City, ELL teacher Jessica St. John is accompanied by Victor, her service dog, a black labrador retriever who helps to mitigate symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

St. John, who grew up with a labrador retriever and had experience training service dogs, got her own service dog through the non-profit organization, Retrieving Freedom.

"(Retrieving Freedom tries) to match your personality with the dog," St. John said. "Victor is a little bit of a baby, and he wasn't reacting well to men with commands. He kind of needs a little coaxing and that mom edge. Our personalities matched, and he was trained in a school."

Besides helping St. John, Victor serves as a cultural tool for students.

"(The students) love him, and so many of my kids don't like dogs," she said. "I've had students that were afraid and now they come in before every class. Also, some kids that maybe don't like people as much, that may be kind of quiet, gravitate towards him and just kind of sit (with Victor)."

In her teaching day at West, St. John has four advanced and one intermediate ELL class.

"We do a lot of reintegrating the basics and making sure no one is missing anything," St. John said. "If your parents don't speak English and you didn't grow up speaking English, then you didn't have as much access to vocabulary as native speakers. So we are trying to build up that vocab."

As a child, she never thought she would be a teacher. "No way, Jose. Not in a million years," she said. But in Afghanistan, the locals inspired her.

"I tried to teach them English in this little laundry room after all of our missions were complete for the day," she said. "I would give them children's books and try and teach them how to read, but I had no idea what I was doing." When she left Afghanistan, she decided that "helping people communicate is going to make more sense than fighting a war. I think there is just more progress that way."

—Peyton Brady & Sidney Kout



**ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING** | Amira Nash, Cat Haxton, Jessica St. John. **Not Pictured:** Chelsea Parrott.



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