

## **68 Words – A podcast presented by The Ability Center**

People, places, and spaces doing disability differently sharing first-hand experience in our monthly podcast. Inspired by the 68 words that sparked the disability rights movement – tune in to hear where it started and what's next.

### **Episode 27 - Michelle & Hugo**

Michelle Juhasz is a counselor at TPS's Chase STEMM Academy. Hugo is the school's assistance dog, and he has literally changed, and probably saved, lives since he's become a part of the TPS community.

And now, the interview:

Eric Chase:

Hi, this is Eric Chase, your host for 68 words. Afternoon host on Cumulus Media Toledo's Q105. Welcome into another episode where we'll talk to TPS counselor, Michelle Juhasz and Hugo. Hugo doesn't have a last name. It's not a Madonna type thing. Hugo is an assistance dog and he's such a good boy. Hugo... Sorry, got carried away. They're here to explain how Hugo has literally changed and maybe saved lives of TPS students, but also teachers and other adults at Chase STEMM Academy.

Michelle Juhasz:

I can assure you from day one when he walked into our building, the very first interaction that was completely unplanned that he had with the student, the staff members that were surrounding us, Hugo, the student, and myself, everyone was in tears because he is a dog, but he is also such a loyal companion and he is so supportive and he just helps in ways that you could never imagine.

Stuart James:

People, places and spaces, doing disability differently. Sharing firsthand experience in our podcast. Inspired by the 68 words that sparked the Disability Rights Movement. Learn where it started and what's next. Hi, my name is Stuart James and I'm the executive director here at the Ability Center, and welcome to 68 Words.

Eric Chase:

Michelle and Hugo, thank you for taking some time to be a part of 68 Words. How do I correctly pronounce your last name?

Michelle Juhasz:

Yuhas.

Eric Chase:

So the J is silent.

Michelle Juhasz:

It is.

Eric Chase:

The J is silent. Juhasz. And you're a counselor at TPS, right?

Michelle Juhasz:

I am. I'm the school counselor at Chase STEMM Academy.

Eric Chase:

What is that STEMM Academy? Because I think when we say TPS, people think of the city schools like Star and Rogers, but TPS is growing, there's an aviation academy. Do you work at the one right on Upton? Is that where you are?

Michelle Juhasz:

No, I'm on Chase in the north end at Chase STEMM Academy. So we're an elementary building K through eight. I do work closely with our magnet schools at TPS because part of my job is making sure we get our scholars where they need to be and make sure that they have the careers that they have in mind, giving them access to those opportunities.

Eric Chase:

Yeah, I love that Dr. Durant and others are steering towards that direction. It's like taking from the Penta playbook

Michelle Juhasz:

Yes.

Eric Chase:

And changing what we normally know about school curriculum. It's different from when you and I were going there, right?

Michelle Juhasz:

Absolutely.

Eric Chase:

How did you find out about having the opportunity? And I assure you that Hugo is here right now, he's being very well behaved, you'll just have to take our word for it. How did you find out about Hugo or any other dog being a part of TPS with the Ability Center?

Michelle Juhasz:

So six years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a luncheon with the Kiwanis Club at the Toledo Club, and the presentation was actually Jordan from the Ability Center, and I was mind blown by watching her interact, her explaining to us what the dog that she brought with her that day was capable of doing. And so I inquired, I emailed her and I actually applied for a dog that time and that was six years ago.

Eric Chase:

See...

Michelle Juhasz:

Proof he's here.

Eric Chase:

That was not Michelle, that was Hugo.

Michelle Juhasz:

Proof he's here. And I went to the district, I was a teacher before becoming a school counselor, and I asked multiple times, "Can we have a dog?" Even we went as far, my husband and I, as to purchase two golden retrievers in hopes of having them trained. So it's taken this long and I'm so thankful to finally have the district on board. And when our lead counselor of Toledo Public Schools came to me and said, "I've been in touch with the Ability Center and I think we have a dog," I was elated. So this has been a big dream of mine to have a canine partner at my office.

Eric Chase:

You are his handler. Does he go home with you?

Michelle Juhasz:

Yes, he does.

Eric Chase:

And you say you did get the other two dogs?

Michelle Juhasz:

Yes, we do. So we're now a family of three dogs, two boys, and my husband and I.

Eric Chase:

How do the dogs get along?

Michelle Juhasz:

They're great. They're great.

Eric Chase:

Good. I usually end with this question and I use it a lot more in our podcast and thank you for listening to some of them to see what you'd be walking into. This seems so obvious and common sense because human's best friend for a long time has been dogs. I've been a dog lover since as long as I can remember, and you're probably one as well, do you ever sit and think, after an experience with a kid or just a positive day with Hugo and go, "What the heck took us so long to put dogs in schools with kids or stressful places at all?"

Michelle Juhasz:

Absolutely, every single day, and I'm to the point now where I couldn't imagine my role without him. And I know when he came to us and with me pleading, pretty much, "Can we please have a dog?" People looked at him as he's just a dog. And I can assure you, from day one when he walked into our

building, the very first interaction that was completely unplanned that he had with a student, the staff members that were surrounding us, Hugo, the student and myself, everyone was in tears because he is a dog, but he is also such a loyal companion and he is so supportive and he just helps in ways that you could never imagine. It's amazing.

Eric Chase:

He's not a service dog, but he's a companion dog, and when he's at school, he's still working.

Michelle Juhasz:

Yes.

Eric Chase:

Can you explain the differences between your two dogs at home, who probably don't work, and Hugo? Because there are big differences. You talked about the training.

Michelle Juhasz:

Sure. There are huge differences. So Hugo has an extensive amount of training, and that was one of my concerns when I agreed to be his handler and he came to live with us. I said I hope our dogs don't ruin Hugo, and in turn, really, Hugo has really helped them, and the difference is his training. He knows before I walk out a door, I need to sit and wait. He's constantly tracking me, waiting to see what his next move is. And at home, of course, he's a dog, but we still work on those rules and expectations because I need those to carry over wherever we go. The amount of training that he has, the amount of knowledge that he has, it's incredible compared to just having a pet.

Eric Chase:

A pet, yeah. But he is working and he's helping adults and kids. How does he? Give me an example of experience, whether it's an adult, a teacher having a hard day, an aid having a hard day, a kid having a hard day. How does he go to work in school and how is he so helpful?

Michelle Juhasz:

Well, we start our morning off every day, our kids, we greet our scholars differently at Chase. So we have music playing when they walk in the door, we want it to be a welcoming atmosphere. So Hugo is on his mat at the door, he greets all the kids. They will come skipping in. They know all the rules. They need to ask before they pet. They walk by, "Hi Hugo," And the smiles are huge. And one of the biggest impacts that Hugo has had in our building is with a first grade student who really struggles from the transition from home to school. He believes that he's not a good reader and he perceives himself to not be a good reader, therefore he just doesn't like to read, and Hugo is the reason... Last year, we struggled to keep him in school.

Hugo is the reason that this child is coming to school every single day because he walks in the door, the student goes and has breakfast, he washes his hands, he comes to me, he makes sure Hugo has water, he helps me brush him, he picks out a book to read, he helps me walk Hugo to his classroom, and then we check in. And before lunch, the student will come to me and he reads to Hugo, and that moment was the first one that got me the first time we did it because when we said to Hugo, "Read," And he put his head on top of that book and just looked at that student, the student just started to read and the

progress that the student is making in reading and just the impact that he has had... And that's one student. We have many great stories of success stories with Hugo and the impact he's making. It's

Eric Chase:

It's a beautiful story. Who knows what could have happened to that kid if Hugo didn't show up? Maybe the worst because I know so many kids in the TPS district, whether it's a STEM school or Rogers, kids have it different than the suburban schools, and that's why Hugo and what you do are so important. How has he changed your job? You said you were a teacher and then a counselor, how have you incorporated him into what you do?

Michelle Juhasz:

So he has been... Well, first of all, he has motivated students to read. He has motivated students to come to school and we are visible and we're available and we're using him as a positive reward for our students. So they're setting goals, there's expectations with a program that we use called i-Ready where the students have to log 15 minutes of math and reading daily, and when they're hitting those goals, their teachers allow them to choose what they would like for a reward, and I have received so many referrals of little Google form, my inbox fills up with students who want to utilize their reward spending time with Hugo. So I've used him that way.

We have worked with emerging readers who will sit with him and they will read and it's like I'm not even there. And the struggles, they just read, and that has been amazing. He has helped me with students who have big emotions, and that has been great because when the students aren't ready to talk, they will sit and pet Hugo and then all of a sudden they just start talking and it's just like they melt. And we even have teachers who come and say, "Can I just come and lay on your office floor with Hugo?" I had a meeting one day and he wasn't there and I wasn't there and I was getting text messages, "Where are you?" So what I've learned from that experience is that when we are not going to be in the building, everyone must be aware. We have to prepare for that.

Eric Chase:

In that case, an email to all is vital. What's your day like as a human being personally and professionally now that Hugo is in your life?

Michelle Juhasz:

So I joke about having, my kids are grown, about having a new two year old that sheds because there's a routine. So when we get up, he eats and we go outside and he gets his teeth brushed and he gets brushed and then we head into school, so he has figured out his routine quickly. It is a lot of work, but it is so worth everything. And it's an adjustment having to navigate my day and incorporate him into it, but it's been such a blessing and I am so, so grateful because he's changing lives.

Eric Chase:

He's saving lives as well. Can you talk more about the adjustments? So we just walked through your morning a little bit, how about as you're about to get out the door, the trip to school, through the school day, if you have to run an errand in the middle of the day?

Michelle Juhasz:

So I am very fortunate that our administrative assistant trained with me. She's a secondary handler, so I am able to hand Hugo off to her if I need to be somewhere that is an emergency and that he can't attend. We have worked through different scenarios because my job as a counselor, I am also an administrator, so I get called off into different places and my job as Hugo's handler is to advocate for him and keep him safe, and my job as a school counselor is to do the same for the students. So finding that balance and knowing what would be stressful for Hugo and what he just needs to sit back and wait for, that has been a learning process and a learning curve. I can't run to the store on my way home from work anymore because I take him home. And I'm thankful that I have family that, if I have a very, very long day, meetings after school, that they're able to come and get him and let him go home and be a dog.

Eric Chase:

We talked a little bit about the extensive training he gets.

Michelle Juhasz:

Sure.

Eric Chase:

How about the extensive training you got to be a handler?

Michelle Juhasz:

Oh my goodness. So myself, our district lead counselor and our administrative assistant at Chase, we spent five days here at the Ability Center learning how to handle Hugo. On day three, I was handed him and his leash and they helped me put him in my car and that was our first night home. That was intense, and you learn a lot. What's great is after those five days, the trainers, Kim, Brittany, they have never left my side. So I know that if I have questions, I can call them, they always respond whether it's at night, in the middle of the day. They've offered all of their help and support. They've been amazing. And what you learn... I feel like I had more training with bringing home Hugo with my binder and all my paperwork than I did bringing home my own children so I felt very well prepared to have him and I knew what to expect.

Eric Chase:

Sure. I think growing something inside of you kind of rewires your DNA and the mom comes out, but you did not birth this dog.

Michelle Juhasz:

No, but he's still my baby.

Eric Chase:

What would you suggest to others that have listened to your story, heard about the little boy who reads with Hugo to get involved in a program like this?

Michelle Juhasz:

I would say do it. I'm sure people are doubtful and think we may have students...

Eric Chase:

There's my light. Hugo, will you stand up buddy? Turn the light back on.

Michelle Juhasz:

There we go.

Eric Chase:

There we go. Sorry.

Michelle Juhasz:

Good boy. Nope. Down.

Eric Chase:

Good job, Hugo. You helped out.

Michelle Juhasz:

Yep. Good job. Down.

Eric Chase:

So getting other schools involved is something you're definitely for.

Michelle Juhasz:

Oh, absolutely. And I know it's the goal of TPS to have more dogs within our buildings. We are sort of piloting this program because Hugo is the very first school facility dog for TPS. I would highly recommend it. The change that he makes... You can't help but look at him and not smile. He is just full of love and he just brings a sense of comfort and calm. He's helped the teachers even when we go to do classroom visits. They know we can't come in unless the floor is clean, so everyone's cleaning up the floor. When we're walking down the hall, the students, you'll hear them whisper, "When he's walking, he's working. When he's walking, he's working." So we've helped sort of unintentionally with hallway behavior. He's just a great asset. Our parents love, love, love him. I've received many emails about, "Thank you so much. My student came home so happy." I would do it. It makes a tremendous difference in your building.

Eric Chase:

None of us need more in our email volume these days. Maybe he should get his own.

Michelle Juhasz:

Yeah, I wish he could.

Eric Chase:

Hugo@tps.org.

Michelle Juhasz:

Yes, please.

Eric Chase:

You hinted a little bit, some of the teachers... We're human beings.

Michelle Juhasz:

Yes.

Eric Chase:

If you love dogs, they're helpful to your mood. We know how hellacious things have been for teachers the last couple of years and even before that. Can you give me a story like you did of the little boy who began to read, but in a teacher sense? Maybe they were super stressed, but they continued to work in a difficult situation because they had Hugo there.

Michelle Juhasz:

And we've had that happen a few times, and what I find is if we go into the classroom and the teachers has requested us to come in, the teachers love to just sit on the floor with him and the students sit on the floor with him and we work through it. I've had teachers come into my office and sit with him. We have a few teachers going through a few life challenges and he has offered them comfort as well. My office door is always open. We have a little dog gate and they'll just show up and say, "Can I just come in?" And I continue to work and they love on him. He's just helpful. Teachers are using their planning time with Hugo, so it's great.

Eric Chase:

City grants are helpful with this because it is expensive to get Hugo trained up correctly and get all the other pieces in place. The city grants were helpful?

Michelle Juhasz:

That's the reason that we have him. When we found out that the city of Toledo was going to sponsor us and we had received a grant to cover his training, that was just the icing on the cake for us because that sealed the deal of him being able to come to us. So I'm so grateful that the City of Toledo believes in the Ability Center Assistance Dog Program because without that, who knows, we may not have him. So to make that available for us, I appreciate that.

Eric Chase:

What age kids are in Chase?

Michelle Juhasz:

Kindergarten through eighth grade.

Eric Chase:

Has he had interactions with older students, with high school students?

Michelle Juhasz:



Not yet.

Eric Chase:

Not yet.

Michelle Juhasz:

Not yet. We decided to get him acclimated to our building first, he is the district's dog, and we can start making visits. I do know that if there's anything significant happening in the district, they've asked if we would respond and of course we will, but we haven't had the opportunity to be in a high school yet. But our eighth graders are the same. They're very protective of him, very, very protective of him, and they do a great job.

Eric Chase:

Does he often try to put his face on the table?

Michelle Juhasz:

No.

Eric Chase:

We've never asked this question before when we've got assistance dogs here, but if Hugo had a dating profile, what would be on there?

Michelle Juhasz:

Oh, we could say that he is handsome with the most brown, beautiful eyes.

Eric Chase:

What are some of his interests?

Michelle Juhasz:

Oh, he loves to play fetch. He loves to swim. We do have a pool so he swims often. He loves to play fetch, he loves to play Tic-tac-toe with the students, that's one of the things that they choose as a reward. We play four corners. We do morning meetings. There's a game called Silent Ball. We go into the hallway and our third graders are in a circle and they try to get the ball between each other's legs, but they can't say anything and we participate in that, so Hugo loves to play Silent Ball. Obviously he loves his treats and he loves the car. He loves taking a ride in the car.

Eric Chase:

How does he sit when he's in the car?

Michelle Juhasz:

He lays down. He's buckled in, so that's a whole thing too. He wears a seatbelt and normally he lays in the backseat and he always sleeps with his head crooked. So if you asked Brittany who had him or Laura, who were his handlers previously, that was one of the things I said, "Does he need a pillow? What do I need to do?" And they said, "Nope, that's just how he lays."

Eric Chase:

He is like another kid. One day he's going to say, "Mom, can I have my earbuds?"

Michelle Juhasz:

Yeah.

Eric Chase:

"Can I have my iPad please?"

Michelle Juhasz:

No. He's just like, "Where's the treat pouch?"

Eric Chase:

What are some of his favorite foods other than everything?

Michelle Juhasz:

Fresh fruit. He loves fresh fruit. He loves cheese. Our own dog requires medication that he gets a little piece of cheese with his medication, and so Hugo has found his way to the counter in the morning to see if he can have cheese too. He does...

Eric Chase:

Hey buddy.

Michelle Juhasz:

He does like fruit, he likes chicken, he pretty much likes anything. He likes frozen water... I usually freeze it. He likes frozen watermelon. He will eat raspberries and he likes blueberries. So in the biggest challenge with the staff...

Eric Chase:

Hi buddy.

Michelle Juhasz:

Is for them not to feed him,

Eric Chase:

Right?

Michelle Juhasz:

Yes.

Eric Chase:

Because he's got to stay in shape.

Michelle Juhasz:

Got to stay in shape. Yes.

Eric Chase:

Where does he poop at school?

Michelle Juhasz:

He doesn't.

Eric Chase:

He doesn't? He holds it the whole day?

Michelle Juhasz:

No, he does. So he is a man of a routine. He eats in the morning at home and then he goes outside and in our yard and then when he comes home and has dinner, he goes back outside. I have not had to clean up a single mess from him. I'm prepared to if need be, but he is pretty scheduled on his bathroom.

Eric Chase:

Yes. He pees though, right?

Michelle Juhasz:

Yes. Oh my gosh. Yes, yes, yes. We go outside about every two hours.

Eric Chase:

Hi buddy. Hi buddy. Good boy. Last question, and please, add anything else if you would like, where does he sleep at night? In your bed with the other dogs?

Michelle Juhasz:

Yes, he does. Yes.

Eric Chase:

Or is it you and your husband sleep with the dogs?

Michelle Juhasz:

That's pretty much it. They've taken over the bed. When he first came to us, he did stay in his crate and our dogs do not sleep in the crate and I felt terrible. I just kept thinking, I know that was his safe place and that's what he's used to, but yes, he has worked his way into sleeping either on his big huge beanbag that he has or in our bed.

Eric Chase:

How big are the other two dogs?

Michelle Juhasz:

They are a little bigger than him. So he weighs 73 pounds, and the other one is 90 pounds and our other golden retriever is 80 pounds.

Eric Chase:

So where did you get such a good deal on a California king-sized bed so you could all fit in there?

Michelle Juhasz:

I know. We need one, so if anyone wants to sponsor that, that would be great.

Eric Chase:

I joke. I have 45 pounds of dog, two beagle mixes, one beagle boxer, another beagle dachshund. I have a beautiful, large king size bed and the three of us use a whole twin size of it because of the way that they lay. So he's got a good life, I'm glad he's giving good lives to other kids in TPS, and if I could wave my magic wand and make everything happen, I would put a dog in every school.

Michelle Juhasz:

I agree. I wish we could. Truly, it is so worth it. You'll never find another loyal friend like you do in a school facility dog. He's been great.

Chief Armstrong:

This is Chief Armstrong of Toledo Fire and Rescue. 68 Words has been a production of The Ability Center, hosted by Cumulus Media's Eric Chase and executive produced by Mallory Crooks. If you, your group, organization, or business is interested in hosting a disability awareness experience or have other inquiries, please contact [info@abilitycenter.org](mailto:info@abilitycenter.org). Until next time, think differently.

### **For More Information**

To learn more about The Ability Center's programs and services, contact us by calling 419-885-5733 or visit [www.abilitycenter.org](http://www.abilitycenter.org)

You can also find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Linkedin](#), and [Instagram](#).

We are located at 5605 Monroe Street, Sylvania, Ohio 43560.