

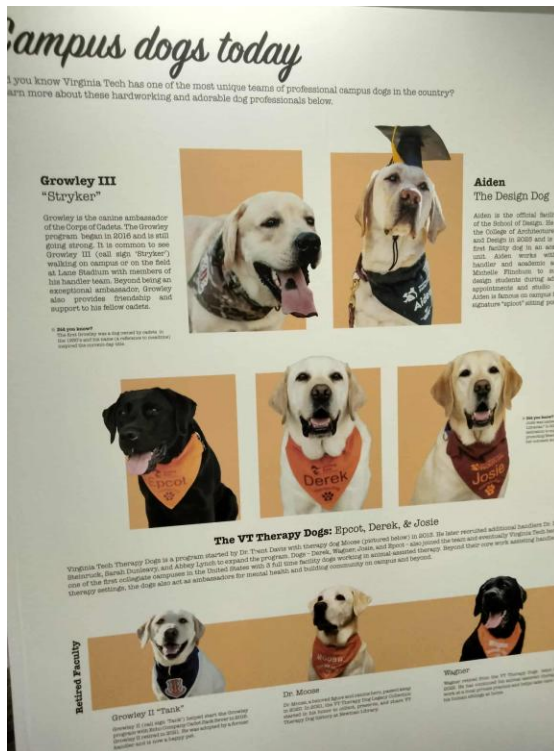
Lessons in Legacy: What Virginia Tech's Esteemed Canines Can Teach About Valuing Contributions

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I just finished being interviewed by a group of Virginia Tech students in the Newman Library at Virgini Tech and on my way out, I saw a group of dogs with their owners, inside the library, being recognized for their contributions to the Virginia Tech Community. I shot and captured the images given below which highlight a wonderful aspect of the Virginia Tech community: the recognition and celebration of campus dogs, particularly therapy and ambassador dogs. Let's explore the significance of this recognition at VT and then consider what lessons, if any, we, Eritreans might draw from such a practice.

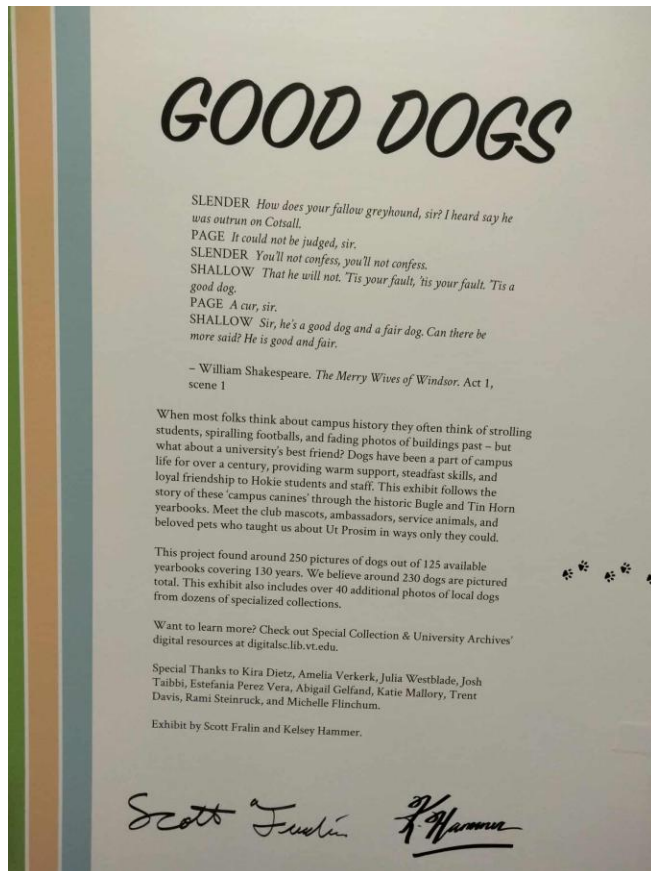
The Significance of Recognizing Dogs' Contributions at Virginia Tech

Virginia Tech's initiative to recognize and feature campus dogs like Stryker, Aiden, Dercel, Josie, Epcot, Tank, Moose, and Wagner (these are the names of the dogs that I saw inside the library) speaks to several important values and benefits within the university community:



- **Enhancing Well-being and Mental Health:** Therapy dogs, in particular, play a crucial role in reducing stress, anxiety, and loneliness among students and staff. Their presence offers comfort, a sense of calm, and a non-judgmental outlet for emotional support. This is especially vital in a high-pressure academic environment. Recognizing these dogs acknowledges the profound positive impact they have on mental health.
- **Building Community and Connection:** Campus dogs often act as natural icebreakers and foster a sense of shared experience. Seeing a friendly dog on campus can lighten the mood, encourage interactions between students, and create a more welcoming and friendly atmosphere. They become beloved mascots and symbols, contributing to a collective identity.

- **Promoting a Holistic Environment:** Recognizing the contribution of animals suggests a university that values a holistic approach to education and well-being. It acknowledges that human flourishing isn't just about academics but also about emotional support, community engagement, and a connection to living beings.
- **Celebrating Loyalty and Unconditional Support:** Dogs offer unconditional love and loyalty,



qualities that can be deeply reassuring. By honoring these dogs, VT celebrates these valuable traits and acknowledges the simple, yet powerful, gifts animals bring to human lives.

- **Educational and Research Opportunities:** As mentioned in the text provided in one of the images, the Virginia Tech Therapy Dogs program is a growing initiative. This recognition can also be tied into broader educational, or research programs focused on animal-assisted therapy, veterinary science, or animal behavior, further enriching the academic mission.

- **Historical and Cultural Preservation:** The "Good Dogs" exhibit highlights the long history of dogs within the Virginia Tech community, going back over a century. This acknowledges the role animals have played in the institution's past,

from "campus mascots" to "beloved pets." It's a way of preserving and celebrating a unique aspect of VT's culture and heritage.

What Eritreans Might Learn (A Frame of Reflection)

As a cautionary note, it's crucial to state that comparing the recognition of campus dogs to the profound sacrifice of human lives in a struggle for liberation is not appropriate. The contexts are entirely different, and the gravity of human sacrifice for freedom is incomparable.

However, I want you to approach this as a reflection on the *principle of recognition and remembrance* – how a community chooses to honor and remember those who have contributed significantly to its collective well-being and identity. Then there might be some general lessons that can be drawn, not as a direct comparison, but as an abstract consideration of community values:

- ✓ **The Power of Public Acknowledgment:** Virginia Tech publicly acknowledges and celebrates its campus dogs through dedicated programs, videos, exhibits, and even yearbook features. This public recognition reinforces their value and ensures their contributions are not forgotten. For any community, the act of *publicly* honoring significant contributions helps to embed those contributions into the collective memory and identity. *Are we, Eritreans, publicly honoring our fallen heroes and heroines and those who contributed and have been contributing to the collective good enough? Let's reflect and do the right thing- commemorate our martyrs.*
- ✓ **Narrative and Storytelling:** The VT materials tell stories about individual dogs – their names, their roles, their personalities, and their impact. This narrative approach makes their contributions tangible and relatable. Similarly, for any group, powerful storytelling about those who have contributed (whether living or deceased) is vital for transmitting values, history, and inspiration across generations. *Do we, Eritreans, respect the Eritrean national narration that has been written with the blood of the tens of thousand Eritreans who had names, lives, and individual unique stories?*
- ✓ **Symbolism and Identity:** The campus dogs become symbols of comfort, community, and the unique spirit of Virginia Tech. Symbols are powerful in shaping a community's identity and fostering a sense of belonging and pride. Every community benefits from identifying and upholding its own meaningful symbols. *Do we, Eritreans, know that Eritrean sovereignty and national identity are the hallmarks of what it means to be an Eritrean?*
- ✓ **Sustained Effort in Remembrance:** The "Good Dogs" exhibit shows a sustained effort to collect and preserve the history of dogs at VT over a long period. This indicates a deliberate and ongoing commitment to remembrance. For any community, sustained and multifaceted efforts are often necessary to ensure that important contributions are honored not just once, but continuously over time. *Can this be a good lesson that we, Eritreans, emulate and make remembering our fallen heroes and heroines, and those who contribute significantly to the collective good a culture that endures for eternity.*
- ✓ **Celebrating Diverse Forms of Contribution:** While the contexts are vastly different, recognizing dogs at VT demonstrates a capacity to appreciate and acknowledge diverse forms of contribution that enhance a community's life and well-being. This can prompt a broader reflection within any society about how it identifies, values, and commemorates *all* forms of positive impact on its collective life and future. *Do we, Eritreans, have the capacity and the magnanimity to identify, value and recognize the contributions of all Eritreans without distinction based on the feeling of “the other”, and all Eritrean assets?*

In essence, while the subjects of recognition are worlds apart, the *mechanisms* and *benefits* of thoughtful, public, and sustained recognition for those who contribute positively to a community's well-being and identity can offer general points of reflection for any society, and particularly truer for Eritrea, as reflected above.