



April 3, 2020

Re: Speaker Michael Hingson

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to provide my highest recommendation and to express support for special guest speaker Mr. Michael Hingson and his guide-dog Alamo. Mr. Hingson was the visiting Woodrow Wilson Scholar to Saint Leo University during the week of February 17 – 12, 2020. Throughout this week-long residency, Mr. Hingson visited various classes, conferenced with students and faculty, and delivered a keynote talk about his 9-11 experience with his guide-dog that was open to the public. He is an inspirational speaker who emphasizes that, with the assistance of his guide-dogs, blindness has not impeded him from leading a full, productive, and even heroic life.

Mr. Hingson is very well-versed in the animal-human bond. Hingson was able to speak in great detail to an interdisciplinary class called “Service and Therapy Animals” about the distinctions between animals that are well and specifically trained, with their owners, to provide service and guidance, and the more loosely described “comfort pets.” These may include animals that some travelers want with them on commercial aircraft, but that do not have what Hingson and others consider appropriate training and behavior. Students in the class, taught by social work professor Dr. Rhondda Waddell, may well encounter such scenarios in their careers. Hingson also described the regulations and laws in place for various settings.

His experiences and knowledge proved riveting to Dr. Allyson Marino’s students in Selected Topics in Medical Humanities. “It was amazing to hear how he was born blind yet he is able to do things that most people can’t,” one student wrote in comments. For instance, as a young man, Hingson earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in physics from the University of California at Irvine, and this set him eventually on a path to an early career in technology training, and then in technology sales. The medical humanities students, Dr. Marino said, “asked engaging questions about his life and his use of a therapy animal. Overall, I thought it was a perfect visit for our future physicians and caregivers. We have been talking a lot about empathy and about narrative medicine. Hearing his story and about the way he has to ‘read’ oral texts, something that many of us take for granted, will make them better caregivers.”

Faculty teaching composition and public speaking classes also asked to have Hingson come visit. As a speaker and ambassador, he has become adept at constructing and delivering narratives, and it benefitted students to observe his communication skills, his lively banter, and his knack for

persuasion. For instance, Hingson would tell students that he would let them play with Alamo at the end of his presentations if they asked him interesting questions first. This was also another pathway into explaining the work protocol for a service dog. Whenever Alamo is wearing his harness, Hingson explained, the dog is working and should not be distracted – and passers-by are asked not to pet Alamo in those moments. When the harness is off, Hingson said, “he’s not working, and he can play.”

While Hingson spoke often about his work in accessibility and disability services, his writing career and Alamo’s background, Hingson also delivered talks on a more serious note; he spoke about his experience on September 11, 2001 to upper-level classes dealing with politics and terrorism and legal topics in counterterrorism. The faculty teaching those courses felt Hingson’s presence in the classroom was significant to their students. Hingson also gave a well-received evening talk on February 19, 2020 that was open to the public. He covered the arc of his life and early education to 9-11 and his current career.

Any organization or institution fortunate enough to bring Michael Hingson in as a speaker will find this experience to be immensely informative, rewarding, and thought-provoking. Please do not hesitate to contact me regarding the merits of this gifted and inspirational speaker.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather R. Parker".

Dr. Heather R. Parker
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