



## Good News

# Himelda & Custer Help Our Students

Story by Regina Smith

This is Himelda Mendez, a volunteer in the Vision Resource Room here at Grover Cleveland, and her guide dog, Custer. Himelda is working with our visually impaired students on their skills in English Braille, the Nemeth (Braille math and science) Code and technology for the visually impaired such as screen-reader programs and other reading and note-taking devices.

Himelda is a splendid role model and inspiration for our visually impaired students – indeed for all students. She had no formal schooling until she began school here in the US at age 17. The school in the farming village of her native Mexico would not admit an almost-blind child. Himelda learned the English language, how to read and write (in print and Braille, though Braille is much more practical for her), the Braille Nemeth Code, computer programs and other technology for the visually impaired, as well as completing all the requirements for a New York State Regents Diploma, and she even passed two AP exams.

Part of Himelda's secret (besides studying) is that she pursued whatever opportunities she saw – one of which was the acquisition of a guide dog. Custer enjoys both work and play. When he is working, "Custer does not know where to go. I have to know. He follows my commands: He knows 200 commands. He guides me around obstacles," Himelda says. Himelda is interested in dispelling myths and miss-information about guide dogs. For example, she reminds us, "Custer is allowed to go into every place open to the public – except the zoo."

When he plays, Custer is like any other dog. "He runs in circles, loves his squeaky toy, sniffs a lot and plays with other dogs who I know are well cared for and safe," Himelda says. Custer has been swimming in the Atlantic Ocean and the Hudson River upstate. Custer gets to travel because Himelda can travel more easily with him. But, as Himelda reminds our students, "You have to have good cane-travel and orientation skills to be eligible for a guide dog." And that, "Cane and dog each have their advantages."

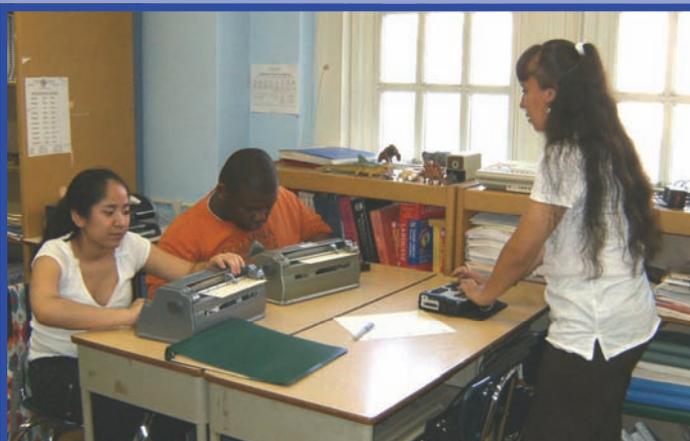
If you love dogs, you may want to consider being a volunteer "puppy raiser" like our own Mr. and Mrs. Nichman. It's a big, but rewarding, responsibility, although a bit sad when you have to give the puppy back to the guide dog school for guide dog training.

Himelda has worked with young children and with adults with visual impairments and other disabilities, as well as with teenagers. She is trying to decide on a career and we hope her working here with us at Grover Cleveland will help her make her decision. People have volunteered their services so she could get Custer and she has volunteered to help others in their acquisition of knowledge and independence. We're so grateful she is here.

Himelda is proud of her Mexican and farming heritage and is also very grateful for the opportunities she has gotten in the USA. This writer often recalls how, when she appeared on the radio show "Teen Talk" and was asked what the first thing would be that she wanted to see well if she could, Himelda answered, "Oh, the Statue of Liberty!"



Himelda Mendez  
& Custer



Students Maritza Flores and Dominique James learning to read Braille from Ms. Mendez - Room 250