

# Stellar student finds friendship is the best algorithm

**For Aashritha Machiraju, an unexpected meeting opened the door to a multigenerational circle of support at ASU**

By Kelly deVos, ASU News  
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They were two retired neighbors, dogs at heel as the evening sun slanted over Hayden Lawn, watching the students in the [AZ Saber](#) club swagger and spar with glowing lightsabers.

Dave Mills and Leo Francis had come to the center of the Arizona State University Tempe campus for a stroll and a little people-watching. They didn't expect to make a new friend.

Then a young woman drifted over and asked, "Can I pet your dog?"

That question became the hinge of a friendship that would widen into something like a family.

Aashritha Machiraju graduated in December 2025 with a master's degree in computer science from the [School of Computing and Augmented Intelligence](#), part of the [Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering](#) at ASU. She's the kind of student who straps sensors to teddy bears to teach machines about sleeping positions, and volunteers to help launch a donation platform for an animal rescue in India.

"What surprised me most about computer science is how much it's about understanding people, not just computers," she says.

That first handshake over a trio of leashed dogs — Jub Jub on Machiraju's side and Luca and Shellby on Francis and Mills' — quickly turned into dinners, cultural exchanges and shared holidays.

Francis and Mills are both residents of [Mirabella at ASU](#), an on-campus community for retirees with an interest in lifelong learning. Mills is an ASU alumnus with degrees in psychology and English who retired from a 30-year career as a U.S. Air Force pilot. Francis is a former residential contractor and reading specialist who relocated to Mirabella from her home in Tubac, Arizona.

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Machiraju, who traveled from Hyderabad, India, to Tempe to study and chase research that might one day prevent illnesses such as diabetes and Alzheimer's disease, became the unofficial ambassador of new restaurants in the Valley. She introduced her friends to the best spots for Indian food. They returned the favor with barbecues where Mills grilled up vegetarian burgers, and Francis baked a vegan cornbread that she swears will convert any skeptic.

Their relationship is a portrait of mutual curiosity. Machiraju remembers the pair of retirees asking questions about India and student life. Francis says she tried to offer the small kindnesses that make a campus feel like home.

"I have traveled a lot," Francis says. "I know what it's like to be in an environment that is unfamiliar. I have a huge sense of admiration for the courage it takes to pursue an education so far from home."

## **A scholar with heart**

Machiraju's academic record reads like a to-do list for someone who loves applied work. As part of the [Engineering Projects in Community Service](#) program, she joined a team building a tremor-reducing glove for people with Parkinson's disease. She was a [Fulton Schools Impact Award](#) recipient and a student researcher in the [Embedded Machine Intelligence Lab](#), completing a thesis that explores health applications of artificial intelligence.

"Aashritha is bright beyond words, kindhearted and determined to go places," Mills says. "I know she'll make a difference. She's a special person."

Beyond the labs and late nights, what stands out for the retirees is how Machiraju has woven community into her graduate experience. When her family in India couldn't make it to her undergraduate commencement because of visa issues, Francis stood up during the portion of the ceremony where family members of graduates were asked to rise.

"I knew her parents weren't there, so I just stood up," she says of an act small in ceremony but huge in meaning. "I felt that connection."

Mills remembers another small but huge moment: When Jub Jub fell ill, Machiraju called him for help getting the dog to the animal hospital.

"It meant a lot to me that she felt comfortable enough to reach out for help and support," Mills says.

## **Friendship as a lifelong lesson**

The opportunity for intergenerational connections is exactly what living at Mirabella is about. Residents have access to attend classes and campus events. Students benefit from older adults' experience and openness, and retirees find renewed inspiration from students' energy and fresh perspectives.

"What really appealed to me was guaranteed access to courses and the campus of a vibrant university," Francis says.

The Mirabella residents' advice to students is delightfully practical: Put yourself out there.

"Reach out, say hi and come get a cup of coffee," Mills says.

Francis' counsel follows the same thread: Find activities you enjoy and use them to meet people. The pair points to the university's many outreach opportunities and encourages students to treat the campus environment as a place for connection as well as study.

For Machiraju, who juggled thesis deadlines and job searches while walking her dog, that advice has paid off in ways academic pedigree alone could not. She gained mentors, collaborators and two steadfast friends who show up for shared meals and moments of encouragement.

Now, Machiraju is thinking about what comes next. She hopes to gain industry experience to understand production-scale systems, then perhaps a return to research in health technology, with an eye to earlier detection and prevention of disease. She talks about diabetes prediction and Alzheimer's disease screening with the same humane clarity that animates her volunteer work.

"I want to build technology that is both technically strong and genuinely helpful to people," she says.

When asked if there's anything she'd like to say about Machiraju, Francis has one final thought.

"Hire her!" she says with a smile.

*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



From left: David Mills, Aashritha Machiraju and Leo Francis take a break from walking their dogs outside Mirabella at ASU. Machiraju graduated in December with a master's degree in computer science from the School of Computing and Augmented Intelligence, part of the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering at Arizona State University. During her time at ASU, she forged a friendship with Mirabella residents Mills, a retired U.S. Air Force pilot, and Francis, a former residential contractor and reading specialist. Photo by Erika Gronek/ASU

## Text image(s)



Aashritha Machiraju is an emerging biomedical technology researcher who received a Fulton Schools Impact Award recognizing excellence in student achievement. Photo courtesy of Aashritha Machiraju





Leo Francis, Aashritha Machiraju and Dave Mills walk their dogs inside Mirabella at ASU. Photo by Erika Gronek/ASU