

Search Dog Foundation—Paws on the Ground

PHOTOS BY KATERI WOZNY



Huck gets a stomach rub from a visitor.

Search Dog Foundation gives canine demonstrations, tours of new Disaster Search City

By Kateri Wozny

Meet Huck, an adorable 7-year-old chocolate Labrador that leads a typical dog's life: he loves playing with his toys, running around and even loves tummy rubs.

But Huck has a more special mission than the rest of his counterparts on earth: he is a search and rescue dog dedicated to serving the nation when a disaster strikes.

"He originally went to the Oklahoma City Fire Department and they tried forever to get him certified," said Deresa Teller, Search Dog Foundation (SDF) volunteer and Huck's handler with California

Task Force 1. "Once Huck came to me, I got him certified within four months."

Teller has been a volunteer handler for the SDF since the beginning and first became interested in search dogs after witnessing the Mexico City earthquake in 1985. When the Oklahoma City bombing occurred, she was also one of the first on scene with her then Border Collie, Bella. After the horrific disaster, Teller became a part of the SDF.

"The most difficult part about being there was when people would show you photos of their loved ones who were missing and asking if Bella and I could find them," she said.

Once joining the SDF, Teller donated four Border Collies and began a long relationship with Ranger, grandson of Bella, on numerous disaster searches over the years, such as the La Conchita mudslides, Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike, as well as several local searches in the area, in-



Huck demonstrates a complicated agility move by climbing down a ladder and guided by his handler, Deresa Teller. Huck is one of many search dogs that was rescued and trained at the SDF's national training facility in Santa Paula, the only non-profit in the nation that provides search dogs free of charge and at no cost to the government or tax-payers.

cluding building collapses or lost hikers. When Ranger passed, she was assigned her new companion, Huck, in August 2012.

"I've always been a nurturer and I love working with dogs," Teller said. "It feels good to know you are helping people. Huck is my special, goofy boy and is very lovable. Overall, he is a great search dog."

THE RESCUED BECOME RESCUERS

Huck is one of many search dogs that was rescued and trained at the SDF's national training facility in Santa Paula, the only nonprofit in the nation that provides search dogs free of charge and at no cost to the government or tax-payers. The dogs also come from shelters and breeders will sometimes donate a dog.

According to the SDF, each year, the organization spends \$10,000 per dog (they

house 16) to make sure they pass the required tests to become certified.

Nationwide, the SDF has 150 teams and 73 certified handlers that have deployed to 112 disaster and missing person searches in California, Florida, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah and Baja California.

"We have an outstanding training staff," said Wilma Melville, founder and board member of the SDF. "I feel a sense of completion of what the SDF has set out to do."

Melville founded the SDF in 1995 after realizing the shortage of certified search dogs in the U.S. She and her search dog were also deployed to the Oklahoma City bombing where only one survivor was found. To this day, she has dedicated her life to improving the way search dogs are chosen, trained and partnered with firefighters and other first responders for disaster relief efforts.



Search dog Allie finds a victim inside a barrel. Once found, the dog's toy pops out. They also learn to find victims inside houses and buried in piles of rubble at the new Disaster Search City that is being constructed by Navy Seabees and Army Reservists.



Search City under construction in Santa Paula. The most visible part of the training facility is the 3.5 acre Disaster Training Zone, where the dogs learn to search for buried people in a 15,000-square-foot concrete rubble pile that resembles a collapsed building.



Donor Allan Friedman poses with SDF Founder Wilma Melville. Friedman had the two-story house in Search City dedicated to his wife, Lois.

But this year has been a special one. It is the first time the SDF held its Hard Hat events, a series of three that ran May through August and showed fun canine demonstrations in direction and control, search and agility, and victim searching in a pile of rubble. Visitors were also allowed to witness first-hand the new Disaster Search City that is being constructed by Navy Seabees and Army Reservists.

Approved by the Department of Defense's "Innovative Readiness Training" program, the experience provides hands-on training for disaster response and wartime missions while creating an amazing "tornado-stricken city" search site for the dogs and handlers. All reservists—with four separate rotations of 29 each since June—are temporarily stationed at the Naval Base in Port Hueneme and shuttled to the training center each time.

"This is a venue site that brings people together," Melville said. "Visitors can see and feel a positive side of the military wanting to help people."

To date, the project has raised more than \$17 million, with the ultimate goal of raising \$20 million total by December 2015.



Archway that leads to the Canine Memorial Wall where each fallen dog is pictured with their handler.

Melville hopes it will be completed by the end of next year.

"We are at the beginning stages," she said. "This site will be a wonderful area where the search dogs can experience a wreck before taking them out into a real life situation."

Patrick and Kathleen Colton, residents of Chicago, drove the distance to attend the last hard hat event of the year. Having a love for dogs and a compassion for the military (both of their fathers were in the Army and Seabees, respectively), the Coltons have been huge supporters of the SDF for years. They leave their estate to the organization in their will.

"The service these search dogs do to helping find people is amazing," Patrick said. "We are so honored and happy to be here today."

DIRECTION AND CONTROL

Dogs can have a great sense of direction, and Huck proved this to be true during the direction and control demonstration, a technique that allows a handler to direct a dog into an area to search or direct him or her out of a hazardous area. On the premises, wooden spools are set in a baseball field pattern 25-yards apart. The dog is taught to go out, back, right and left and recall with the handler's voice, hand and whistle commands.

"We make the spools interesting to the dog by rewarding them every time they get on it," explained Sonja Heritage, SDF master canine trainer. "These highly toy-driven dogs learn quickly that by following the handler commands, they get their toy reward. It's a win-win situation."

CANINE MEMORIAL

A moving and emotional part of the training facility is the canine memorial. Walking towards it, an archway with the words, "We Have Not Forgotten," leads into the area with a "Rainbow Bridge" near the memorial. Each fallen dog is pictured with their handler and has a memorable



The SDF held its first Hard Hat events that ran May through August for visitors to tour the new Disaster Search City and watch the dogs demonstrate their skills.

story behind it.

"You develop a special bond like no other," said Debra Tosch, executive director for the SDF. "This is a special reflection wall that honors them."

DISASTER TRAINING ZONE

The most visible part of the training facility is heading up the road to the 3.5 acre Disaster Training Zone, where the dogs learn to search for buried people in a 15,000-square-foot concrete rubble pile that resembles a collapsed building. As the dog searches, the handler waits for an important bark alert before entering the rubble themselves. The pile also contains distractions such as squirrels, food and clothing.

"The dogs tend to ignore the distractions because their game of tug-of-war with the victim is more fun," Heritage explained. "Tug-of-war is their reward."

Across the rubble is Disaster Search City, where Army Reservists and Seabees work hard to construct it for man's best friend to learn in. Resembling a movie set, the city consists of a single-story house and motel that has a long hallway and 10 rooms. Once completed, the dwellings will have overturned furniture and other items for the dogs to search.

"This is a unique experience to have us come together and build something to help people all over the world," said Chief Warrant Officer Joseph Wood of Montana.

There is also a two-story house with an inside stairwell, attic and a ladder reaching to an outside window. Even the space underneath the house is designed to be partially flooded for search efforts.

The two-story dwelling was named after Allan Friedman's wife, Lois, in her memory. Both have always had a special bond with dogs and even his son and daughter have taken in more than 100 rescue dogs over the years.

"We believe in Wilma's vision and my wife and I always decided to help something greater than us long after we're gone," said Friedman, resident of Westlake Village. "If she was here) this would make her smile."

SEARCH AND AGILITY

Even more fun happens in the 11,200-square-foot search and agility training area, where dogs demonstrated how to control their foot placement and use their balance to move safely across moving obstacles, climb ladders and cross over high voids on planks calmly. They also learn how to find victims in barrels by sticking their nose in the barrel lid that contains a person. Once found, the dog's toy pops out.

"This is the foundation training that helps them when searching and finding buried victims in the rubble," Heritage explained.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

The SDF has big plans for the future. They plan on expanding Search City with a fire station, school and residential area with overturned houses and a collapsed freeway prop with overturned cars. A train derailment will also be added.

"It will be a Universal Studios kind of feel to it," Melville explained.

The SDF also plans on building a 13,256-square-foot Canine Pavilion, which begins construction on Sept. 1 and will consist of offices, classrooms, surgery, medical and reception rooms, a social area and housing suites that can accommodate up to 40 canines.

They even plan to build a 40,000-square-foot hotel prop that has slid down a hill to replicate Hotel Haiti from the tragic Haiti earthquake. A welcome center and handlers lodge for visiting handlers and their families is also slated for construction.

"The national training center will be a learning center for the nation's canine disaster search teams," Melville said. "By creating mini-disasters the teams of the future will not have to learn on the job. They will have met a multitude of challenging situations before responding to a disaster. This is the Search Dog Foundation's gift to the nation."

For more information on the SDF, visit: www.searchdogfoundation.org. ■

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