

Rudi: NKPD's rescue dog in training – Wednesday, 02 April 2008



Photo: Lindsay Olivier

NORTH KINGSTOWN — It wasn't until Sept. 11, 2001 that North Kingstown fire department engine Lt. Mike LeClair began researching search and rescue dogs.

LeClair, assistant K-9 manger of the Rhode Island Urban and Rescue Task Force, said he realized the value such dogs had in the days following the World Trade Center attacks.

"I really saw how those dogs aided in the search, so I began researching and meeting with Chief Murray and really got positive feedback," he said.

In 2002, LeClair bought Greta, a German Shorthair Pointer. But search and rescue dogs begin to retire at age seven or eight, so he began to search for a replacement.

"Since getting Greta she's been called on six to eight search calls in town, as well as South Kingstown and Jamestown."

LeClair said Greta only helps with live search scenarios such as when an Alzheimer's patient walks away from home or if a child is reported missing.

North Kingstown is the only fire department in the state that has a search and rescue dog. Months ago, LeClair contacted Deb Scott, a local breeder of Dogwood Labradors who donated a dog to the North Kingstown Police Department's K-9 unit a few years ago, and mentioned he was looking for a new dog to replace Greta.

"Labradors are a unique breed and I feel that people have lost the true meaning of breeding labs. These dogs make great pets and they have a desire to a good hard day's work. They love to be around people," Scott said.

After extensive testing among a litter of nine puppies, a black Labrador named Rudi, was deemed the best fit. Rudi is a puppy of Mini's, the NKPD's dog.

"There were various tests we did with the dogs to see if they startled at noises or strange people and how their temperament was. Rudi was the best candidate. Even at that young age their personalities come out," LeClair said.

Vigorous training starts right away. As he had done with Greta, LeClair began training Rudi when he was just eight weeks old. Starting that early sets the foundation for training and it generally takes up to 18 months to fully train a search and rescue dog.

Training includes off-leash voice and hand signal commands, obedience training and as Rudi gets older, LeClair will begin search drills.

Implementing the search and rescue dog program costs the department and town little to no money. LeClair bought Greta with his own money and Rudi was donated. Veterinary care is made possible through donations. Last week, Wal-Mart donated \$1,000 to help maintain Rudi.

When it comes to search and rescue dogs, five breeds have been identified as the top breeds that excel in training and as search dogs: Labradors, Border Collies, German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers and Belgian Malinois.

Scott donated Mini to the police department and had no reservations in doing the same for the fire department.

"Knowing these dogs will be in good hands and do wonderful things for the community, I was happy to donate and do my part," she said.

"The great thing about this program is that we not only provide assistance to NK, but other communities within the state that may need help. The State Police only has two dogs, so if something is happening locally, we can get to the scene very quickly. It's a resource that very beneficial," said LeClair.

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