Schutzhund Canine Ambassador

Canine Ambassadors

The training and temperament testing that have gone into creating a schutzhund-titled dog create a dog who is better able to be a contributing member of human society. These dogs contribute in a tremendous variety of ways, from police K-9 service to canine therapist. Please share with us some of the ways that your German Shepherd Dogs have served as canine ambassadors. Contact Contributing Editor Julia Priest at K9Julie@inreach.com with your stories.

Attentive Healing:

Crisis Therapy Dogs at Ground Zero

by Julia Priest

The big firefighter, skin mottled with gray ash and streaked with sweat, pulled his face back from the German shepherd's red-brown ruff, and rested his chin on his uniformed chest. The man's eyes were swollen, but his face had taken on a calm, and he looked for a few moments as he hadn't in weeks, as though he had found some peace. The dog's neck was soaked with tears. Uno had served as a confessional and therapist to another victim of the World Trade Center bombings.

The firefighter had spent the last dozen nights tearing through wreckage with first a shovel, then his hands, trying to contain his panic and grief. He had parked his car as close as allowed to the 19-acre rubble pile that was now a vast gravesite, refusing to leave his brothers and friends. He needed to be strong for his fellow firefighters and for the families and the people he served. But when he collapsed exhausted in the back seat of his car after every 16-hour day, needing desperately to sleep, but even more to cry, he found he could do neither.

He was looking for his son, a firefighter too, and inside he knew he would never find him. Still, he couldn't cry. Somehow, the big dog with gentle eyes and steady presence had allowed him to open up, and to spill his sorrow and pain into him.

Uno and his owner Pat Gartman had been called by the Red Cross shortly after the attacks and asked to respond as a Crisis Response Therapy Team. Pat was trained as a therapist and Uno was trained as a show dog. He was bred and raised to perform as a schutzhund dog, and his structure, gait, and attitude made him competitive in the show ring, where he earned many high placements and was named the 2000 Canadian Sieger.

But Uno had additional talents. He was one of those special animals that appears to be an empath. He sensed the needs of human beings and sought them out to comfort them. One of only a handful of such dogs in the United States, he had completed a rigorous training and screening process with trainer Cindy Ehlers in Oregon, where the Gartmans live.

The dogs were subjected to a series of demanding evaluations to make sure they were unflappable in every situation. If they reacted with even a hint of sharpness or aggression, they were immediately dropped from the program. Pat and Uno trained for three months, exposing the dog to every kind of situation in shopping malls, airports, nursing homes, even mental wards, meeting every kind of person.

No amount of bizarre behavior could get Uno to alert on a harmless person. Noises, strange surfaces, frightened people, old people, little children, intoxicated men, staggering, drooling, or gesticulating invalids never set him off. Uno seemed to always rise to the occasion. "He would just sense what was needed; he'd assess the situation and then go for it," said Pat. He would seek one person out, and lay his head in his lap. Pat came to know it was a sign that the man or woman had a turmoil inside which needed calming. Uno knew how to calm.

Although Uno completed his titles with impressive scores and performed with vigor in the protection portion of his schutzhund training, he was steady and clear headed enough to separate the game on the field from everyday life, and he loved people. People who would never hug a stranger, who would never open up to a therapist, would so often talk to Uno that Pat just came to accept it. She never initiated the counseling session, but gently followed the path that Uno opened up. Most often, she would just stay back and listen, or step away and let Uno do the session himself.

"A lot of people would relate to Uno, because he reminded them of a dog they had in their childhood or just because he couldn't talk, only listen," said Gartman. Pat and Uno passed a certification test devised by Ehlers and recognized by the Red

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Cross. Many dogs are able to perform therapy work, and serve as comfort to the elderly or disabled, but for this special certification, the pass rate is extremely low. There are currently only four certified dogs in the United States.

Ehlers had responded with her own dog, Tivka, a Keeshond, to the Thurston High School shooting in Springfield, Oregon, to assist victims of the trauma there. When the news came of the attacks on the World Trade Center, Ehlers and her dog flew to the scene as soon as the airports opened. Once there, she called Gartman and told her. "We need you here. Can you bring Uno?" Pat and her husband Bill flew out September 26.

As a registered service dog, Uno was allowed to fly in the cabin of the plane. On arrival, they reported to the Brooklyn American Red Cross headquarters for orientation and processing. The next day, they traveled to the World Trade Center site, and stopped by the veterinary MASH unit where Uno received an extensive medical exam and was fitted with soft boots to protect him from

Surveying the devastation

glass and debris. (The Crisis Therapy certified dogs were the only animals besides SAR dogs allowed at the scene.)

From there, they went directly to Ground Zero where, says Gartman, they were totally unprepared for the enormity of the destruction and chaos. "We were completely overwhelmed," said Pat. "The extent of the destruction was far more than I could have imagined from seeing it on TV. The smell was like nothing I have ever experienced in my life." Everywhere she looked, she saw devastation. The sheer size of it was beyond comprehension, and even 15 days after the attack, there were still hellish fires burning deep within the 19-acre rubble pile.

"Every time a bulldozer moved some rubble, flames came shooting up. I had to tell myself it was souls going up to heaven," she recalled. Fitted with a hard-hat and safety gear, Pat and Uno went right to work moving among the workers, with Bill along as support and recorder. Pat found that often the firemen and police officers would seldom approach her or want to talk when they were in groups together, but later, as individuals, they would seek out the counselor and her dog. Their terrible memories were painful for Pat to hear, but she found that Uno could act as intermediary and shock absorber.

She related stories almost too difficult to hear, even third hand.

Uno and Pat talk to some FDNY firefighters

Gartman shared some of her notes from the scene: "We alternated between Ground Zero and the Family Center on Pier 94, and I don't know which was the hardest. We'd ride on the ferry with the families, and as we approached the site, we saw their mood change from shock to pure pain and grief. The dogs became very supportive, moving to each person and rendering emotional aid."

Many of the people told her they were able to find a connection between a lost loved one and affection for a pet. It was as though the dogs served as a sort of bridge allowing them to let go. "The dogs acted almost like emotional sponges, soaking up the waves of emotion," she said. Uno came away after each shift, totally drained. He would not play or respond, but just wanted to sleep deeply for 8 to 10 hours. At one point he became dehydrated and needed intravenous fluids from the Vet MASH unit.

One of the grisly tasks faced by recovery crews was to try to identify body parts. Often there was little recognizable as human, but in one case, a man reported finding the remains of a woman's arm, the hand frozen into a fist. When the workers gently wrested open the clenched fingers, they found the tiny hand of an infant, probably her child, inside.

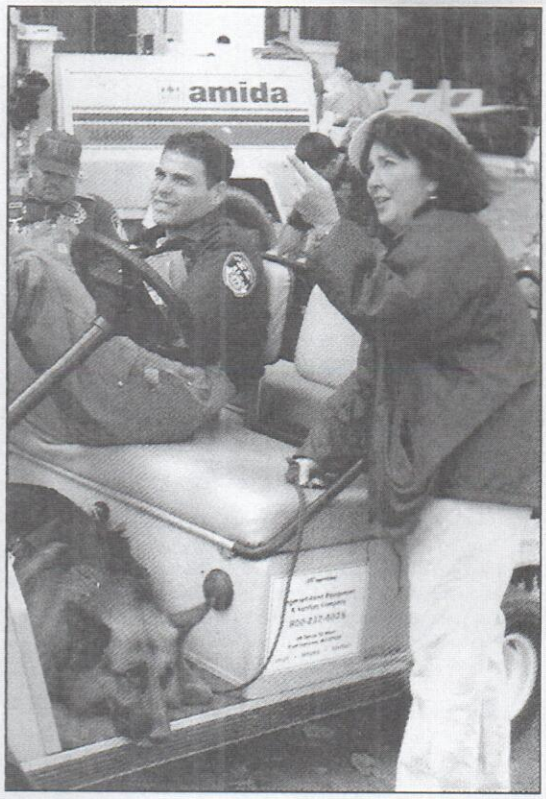
Another firefighter talked about how he had hurried to the site, desperate to search, to find someone he could help, but his progress was thwarted when he found he could not negotiate the shards of concrete and steel. They were too slippery with remains and body parts from those who had jumped from the burning towers. He could not stop having nightmares about it.

These images, and too many more to tell, were imprisoned in the psyches of the men and women who searched day after day to find some sign of hope in this hopeless place. Uno's job was to try to allow them to vent, to purge themselves of some of the bitter pain.

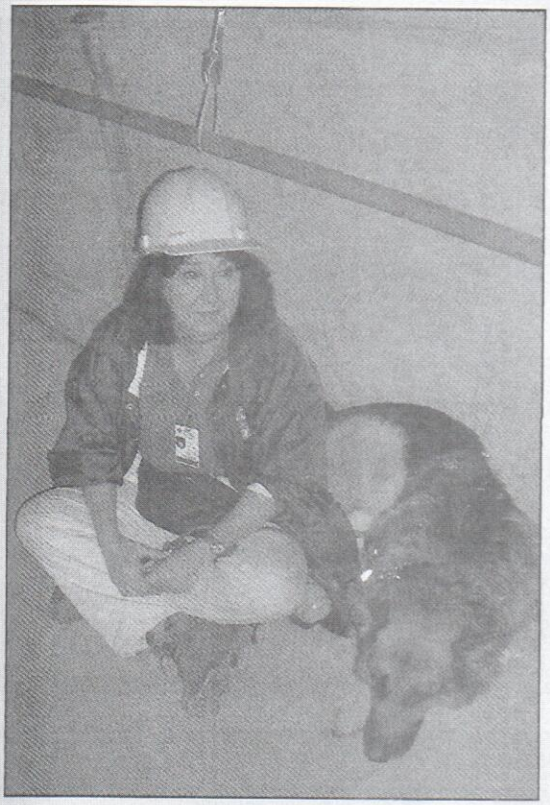
A little boy wearing a fireman's helmet grasped the hand of his grown-up escort, a compatriot of his lost father. The boy walked directly to Uno and got down on his knees, his sad eyes level with the dog's. He laid his arms around Uno's neck, and stared intently into his eyes, confessing in low tones the feelings of loss and hurt, speaking only to Uno. The dog seemed to listen to him. He never moved, except to lick away the boy's tears, and when he was done, the little boy stood up. He took his escort's hand and walked away, turning back only briefly to wave goodbye to the dog.

Fire and police administrators had been warned, Gartman said, that suicide, divorce, and alcoholism-already high among safety workers-was sure to skyrocket in the coming months and years. The human soul cannot contain such incomprehensible grief and not leak somehow, they were told. "People would just sit sometimes, in a completely numb state. Rationally, they would have to make themselves numb to survive," said Gartman, who has a B.S. in rehabilitation counseling from the University of Texas Southwest Medical School.

Police, firefighters, national guardsmen, and volunteers kept giving Uno chicken nuggets, cheeseburger morsels, and all sorts of junk food. The handsome male had been on a diet and training regimen to get ready for his lifetime korung, and at first Pat worried he would get fat. With all the stress and work he did, though, she said, he even lost a little weight.



Getting a ride . . .



A Well-earned rest.

When they passed the last checkpoint on the day they left, one of the rescuers in the crowd held up a sign that said "You are our heroes. Thank you." "At all the sites, there are thousands of heroes," said Pat. "When we left, we felt a sadness, because we knew we would be needed for many weeks to come."

Pat and Bill Gartman live with Uno, and five other German shepherd dogs in Oregon, where they operate NexTime Products, offering watches, jewelry and accessories to the SV-style GSD fancier. Uno is a registered therapy dog through the Delta Society, but Pat has been told that when his current certification expires, he will no longer be allowed in the program because he is schutzhund titled. (Pat Gartman can be contacted by email at unoult1@cs.com or at www.nextime.net.)

About the Author:

Julia Priest is a writer and features editor for the Lodi, CA, News-Sentinel. She has been involved in schutzhund for about 10 years and has earned more than 40 schutzhund, obedience, and tracking titles, many on dogs of her own breeding. E-mail Julia at k9julie@inreach.com or contact her through her Web site, www.sontausen.com

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"Everyone was so kind to Uno," she said. One time, a priest came up and gave them 40 pounds of dog biscuits. "We carried it around with us all day. We didn't have the heart to refuse him," she said. Gartman added, "Even though I have worked dogs in search and rescue for nine years and in many circumstances, I have never had a more satisfying or worthwhile experience."

Uno and Twka meet some NYPD officers.