

in their
Debt

By Jen Reeder



HELPING HEROES

First Responder Therapy Dogs offer stress relief to
"help the helpers."

Rocket with a couple of firefighter friends.

PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY JANOWSKY

The dispatcher at a 911 call center was too busy to notice that a yellow Lab named Makana had pulled her handler across the room to lie down near him. But between calls, he could sense someone was standing behind him and glanced over his shoulder at the woman silently holding the end of her dog's leash.

Charlotte Winters smiled at the dispatcher, apologized for standing so close, and explained, "My dog is on your right."

The man looked surprised, then happy. He quickly said, "Oh, okay" before tapping his headset to answer an incoming call with, "9-1-1. What's your emergency?" As he spoke to a presumably frantic caller, he dropped his right hand to stroke the Lab's head.

"He kept petting her for the whole call," Winters recalls. "It seemed to really help him."

Winters and her loving Lab are volunteers with First Responder Therapy Dogs, a national nonprofit that offers therapy dog visits for first responders at 911 dispatch centers as well as fire stations, police stations, wildfire basecamps for firefighters, and other first responder centers.

For instance, Makana also visits with first responders who work at the Golden Gate Bridge to prevent suicidal people from jumping off the bridge. "They definitely have a high-stress job," she says. "They're so appreciative. Makana is a classic Lab who just loves food, loves people, loves pretty much everything. She loves getting belly rubs on visits."

Makana also turns on her charm at camps hosted by NorCal Women in the Fire Service for high school girls considering a career in firefighting. She's comforted mourners at memorials for fallen police officers and once, on request, joined other First Responder Therapy Dogs at a middle school after a teacher died by suicide.

Winters is grateful that her Lab – aka, her "three-year-old puppy" – can offer canine comfort to her community. "I've met so many nice people, and I just feel like there's such a need," she says. "It's so rewarding."

Labs like Makana can be terrific First Responder Therapy Dogs, according to Heidi Carman, the nonprofit's executive director. She founded the organization in January of 2021 after the devastating 2020 fire season in Northern California, when she and her golden retriever, Kerith, visited firefighters at basecamps.

"Our whole purpose is to help provide mental health support to first responders, because their job is very stressful, and they are the helpers. They are not inclined to ask for help because they're the ones who are running in to go and help all of us," she says. "But when we bring



PHOTO COURTESY OF FIRST RESPONDER THERAPY DOGS

Charlotte Winters and Makana.



PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY JANOWSKY

Emily Janowsky and Rocket.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FIRST RESPONDER THERAPY DOGS

Heidi Carman with April

dogs to them, it's extremely beneficial. Petting a dog lowers [the stress hormone] cortisol and improves moods."

Support for the cause spread quickly. The organization now boasts more than 360 therapy dog teams – including around 60 teams with Labs – in 46 states. (Carman hopes this year volunteers will join in the four remaining states: Louisiana, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Mississippi.)

"When they see a Lab coming, there's definitely no fear – just smiles because Labs are so adorable," she says. "We need the Labs. Bring us the Labs!"

First responders are often reluctant to speak about their experiences with a therapist, but with a dog, they don't need to speak, according to Carman. Whenever she visits a fire station in Marin County with her seven-year-old yellow Lab, April, one firefighter always lowers his head to silently greet the dog.

"They put their heads next to each other, and they're having this little conversation, but they're not talking," she says. "April is just there for him. It's this quiet moment where so much is being said, but there are no words."

She's often witnessed the positive effect of Labs at wildfire basecamps – she's particularly fond of locals Moose, a chocolate Lab, and Rhino, a black Lab – and appreciates that Labs are typically so friendly and unflappable. Case in point: April stays calm when she's visiting a fire station and a call to respond to a fire comes in.

"The fire department gets a call, and they have to take off – there are lights and sirens and everything," she says. "But the Labs that I've experienced and work with, it doesn't bother them. They're just so awesome."

Volunteer and board member Emily Janowsky agrees. Her yellow Lab, Rocket, a retired breeding dog for Guide Dogs for the Blind, loves meeting new friends as a therapy dog for First Responder Therapy Dogs.

In addition to visiting first responders at police and fire stations, the eight-year-old Lab visits corrections officers at a jail, and members of the public at community events, like the opening of a new fire station. He's also offered comfort at "debriefs" that happen at stations after a traumatic experience, like the death of a police officer.

"I can bring Rocket anywhere, and I trust him," she says. "I can take him to a crowded room. I can take him to a parade with lots of noises. He could have twenty-five kids petting him at once. He's just trusting, loving, goofy, mellow, and reliable."

Because Labs are such a popular breed, first responders who meet Rocket often tell Janowsky stories about their own Labs. Others ask to take photos with the friendly dog to share with loved ones while they're away.

"Inevitably, they'll break into a smile and pet the dog," she says. "Our dogs are able to reach them in a very easy way. I



PHOTO COURTESY OF FIRST RESPONDER THERAPY DOGS

April visits a firefighter.

feel like dogs have such a gift, and it feels like a gift to be able to share them with people, especially when they're in a time of need."

Janowsky hopes other Lab lovers will consider volunteering with their dogs to help achieve the organization's goal of having therapy dog visits available to every first responder in America. She believes it's a win-win, since it can help decrease the rates of post-traumatic stress and suicide among first responders while offering social dogs a fun activity.

"We always joke about a therapy dog's 'work' in quotes because they're giving love and getting love," she says. "What's better than that?" 🐾

For more information about First Responder Therapy Dogs, visit: FirstResponderTherapyDogs.org. Follow Rocket on Instagram: @labrocket.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America and a member of the DWAA Hall of Fame. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.jenReeder.com.

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