

By Jen Reeder

Searching and Finding

Yellow Lab Keb inspires a book and wins a major award thanks to her exceptional career as a search-and-rescue dog.



Suzanne and Keb.

In 2001, Washington State resident Suzanne Elshult had just left the corporate world and was looking for a way to give back to her community that leveraged her love for the outdoors. Then came the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

As she watched dogs searching for survivors in the rubble, she suddenly knew what she wanted to do.

"I looked at my husband and I said, 'I wonder if there is a canine search-and-rescue group here locally,'" she recalled. "Two months later, I walked in the door with my first Labrador retriever."

Over two decades later, Elshult has volunteered in search and rescue with three yellow Labs: Bosse, Keb, and Kili. Through her nonprofit Cascadia Search Dogs, she trains her dogs and others using positive reinforcement methods.

"I've only worked with Labs," she said. "They fit my personality really well."

That compatibility has paid off. Last year, the nonprofit American Humane named 12-year-old Keb the 2022 Search and Rescue Hero Dog in its annual Hero Dog Awards.

"She loves using her nose," Elshult said.



Hero Dog Keb has used her nose on more than 100 missions, often in challenging conditions. For instance, the pair has been dropped by helicopter onto the side of Mount Rainier into snowy terrain at 8,000 feet, where they had to avoid stepping through snow bridges or into hidden underwater streams.

After the devastating 2014 Oso mudslide that killed 43 people and destroyed 49 homes in a rural Washington community, Keb navigated through splintered buildings and alerted on three different victims in a single afternoon.

Keb achieved certification in multiple search-and-rescue disciplines, including Wilderness Air Scent, Avalanche Rescue, First Responder Disaster, and Human Remains Detection. In fact, the latter has been her primary focus for the past five years.

Elshult, a volunteer search and rescue canine handler with both Mason County Search and Rescue and the Canine Forensics Foundation, said though human remains search work doesn't typically get as much acclaim as live finds, it's vitally important.

"Families that have missing loved ones who have been missing for a day or a week or a month or years or even decades are in an absolutely horrible situation of waking up every morning feeling compelled to continue to search for their loved ones," she said. "I don't think we ever bring closure, but we bring answers and hopefully they can finally complete the burial, move forward, and stop searching."

They've searched for children, adults with dementia, mushroom pickers, and hunters. In one memorable find, Keb found the jawbone of a woman who had been missing for nine years.

When Keb alerts for a find – sometimes after numerous long days on deployment – Elshult feels a mixture of pride and sadness.

"You're really sad for the person and the family, and at the same time, you are proud that all that work results in an answer for somebody," she shared.

Labs excel at search-and-rescue work because of their hunt drive and "really good nerve strength," according



Boarding a helicopter for a remote drop-off.



Keb loves her ball reward for a good search!

to Elshult. They might spend multiple 15-hour days searching disaster areas with treacherous footing alongside large equipment like excavators and first responders such as firefighters and police officers, while helicopters whir overhead.

It also helps that Labs are eager to do it all for a treat or the chance to play with a ball. Both Keb and Elshult's younger Lab, Kili, are highly motivated by their toy drives.

"They will literally do anything to get that ball. So that's what they work for – that's the paycheck," she explained.

Elshult hikes for over an hour each day with Keb and Kili. (Fun fact: They're both named for mountains she's climbed: Kebnekaise, the highest mountain in her native Sweden; and Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa.)

To keep their skills sharp between deployments, the dogs practice searching for biological matter like teeth donated by dentists. Clever Kili is more rambunctious than serious, soulful Keb, and figured out a short cut: watching to see when Keb alerts on a scent and then sprinting past her to try to claim the find as his own.

Now that Keb is slowing down with age but still enjoying scent work, Elshult is turning their focus to less physically demanding work.

"In preparation for Keb's retirement, I started training for Historical Search a couple of years ago, and she was certified," she said. "So she will be able to use her nose looking, for example, for Native American ancestral remains."



Understanding the nuances of her dog's body language to know when she's alerting is a key component to the team's success. So it's not surprising that Keb and Elshult have forged a powerful bond.

"When you spend that much time with a dog doing life and death activities and having the experiences that we've had together, you just develop a bond that cannot be broken," she said. "My dog can't do her work without me, and I can't do my work without her."

Elshult details their special bond and experiences in the new book *A Dog's Devotion: True Adventures of a K9 Search and Rescue Team*, which she co-authored with James Guy Mansfield, who offers the team field support through navigation, radio communication, and looking out for hazards on deployments. He was so impressed with Keb's prowess that he suggested they write the book.

"The reason we wrote the book was to be able to share the important work volunteer canine search-and-rescue teams do," she said. "And on a personal level, I just want to inspire people to dream big and go for it."

On November 11, 2022, Elshult and Keb traveled to Palm Beach, Florida, for the American Humane Hero Dog Awards. The nonprofit hosts the annual nationwide contest to help shine a light on all the heroic work dogs do while raising awareness of how animals provide us with lasting hope, according to Laura Sheehan, senior vice president of communications at American Humane.

While Keb won for Search and Rescue, other categories highlighted service dogs, shelter dogs, military dogs, law enforcement dogs, guide/hearing dogs, and therapy dogs.

"It was beyond inspiring to meet Keb and the rest of the Hero Dog Award category winners because their service to us humans is nothing short of miraculous and 'paw-inspiring,'" she said. "You could feel the palpable energy in the room that night with these extraordinary animals who do so much to help us in our daily lives."

Keb was a "perfect fit" to be the 2022 American Humane Search and Rescue Hero Dog because of her heroic and remarkable career, Sheehan noted.

"No matter the elements or terrain, Keb has remained a steadfast and courageous search-and-rescue dog worthy of the title of American Humane Hero Dog," she said. "We can't thank Keb and the rest of our 2022 American Humane Hero dogs enough for all that they do to make our world a better place." 🐾

All photos courtesy of Suzanne Elshult. For more information about Keb and A Dog's Devotion, visit: www.SuzanneElshult.com. Follow Keb's adventures on her Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/ADogsDevotion. For more information about the American Humane Hero Dog Awards, visit: www.HeroDogAwards.org.



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