

Sniffing



Ron Burleson and Willow

Out **CRIME**

Lab helps protect kids as Southern California's first electronics detection K-9

A yellow Lab named Willow loves the game she plays every day: searching for electronics. When she wins, she's rewarded with food. But the real winners are the children she helps save from online predators.

Willow and her handler Ron Burlison, an investigator for the San Diego County District Attorney's Office, are part of the federal Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. They work together during search warrants to find hard drives, thumb drives, cell phones, and any electronic storage device that might contain evidence.

When they teamed up in November of 2019, Willow became the first electronics detection K-9 in Southern California. "She has definitely found evidence that's helping to save kids, and that's our goal here," Burlison said. "She's been able to find some stuff that wouldn't have been found otherwise."

Willow is trained to find a chemical compound in electronics that keeps them from overheating. Often, suspects hide their child pornography in thumb drives by taping them to the bottom of a drawer or underneath a dresser, or even in a box in the garage.

"They're hiding this stuff from their family as much as they're hiding it from us," he explained. "When you go into a garage and it's floor to ceiling with boxes and just junk everywhere, it would take us all day to go through those boxes. Willow's going to go in there, start sniffing boxes, and in 20 minutes she can finish searching the garage."

When Willow finds evidence, it's confiscated so it can be examined forensically. Then detectives must look at all the content, which is time consuming and emotionally taxing, but incredibly important. "I just had a case where I had 23,000 pictures and 4,500 videos of little boys I had to look at, but we look at every one because if there are pictures he's taken or even pictures he received that aren't just these commercial ones we see floating around the internet, then we need to find those kids," he said. "Those



kids need to be identified. We need to make sure they're safe, and Willow helps do that. Willow's out saving kids that otherwise nobody may know about."

Willow helps promote wellness at the office by acting as a therapy dog for investigators who need a break from looking at the disturbing evidence. She wanders around with a tennis ball in her mouth, inviting her human co-workers to give it a toss.

"Obviously the work we do is really stressful, and it can be very difficult with the content that we're dealing with, and she's a good therapy dog," he said. "People will be looking at pictures and need to take a break, and they'll grab Willow and start rolling around on the floor with her. Everybody's in a better mood when they're petting a dog."

The Lab also comforts children and family members during search warrants. Her presence helps distract kids and calm them down while police officers search their home.

At home with Burleson, she's part of the family. She sleeps on the couch, plays with the other dog, and is essentially a pet. The only difference is she only eats when she's successfully completed a search, so Burleson hides electronics for her on days when they haven't executed a search warrant so he can reward her.

At the start of a search, he'll cue Willow to seek. She starts sniffing, and when she alerts, she sits. Then he says, "Show me," and she'll use her nose to pinpoint the scent. Then comes the food reward. "We are constantly training and constantly working together, so that helps us bond," he said.

Willow, now three, trained in electronics detection at Jordan Detection K-9 in Indianapolis, Indiana. The owner, Todd Jordan, is a firefighter who started out training arson dogs but switched his focus to electronics detection after a police officer asked for help.

In 2014, he started training a black Lab named Bear to be the program's first electronics detection K-9. As part of training, they'd join the Indiana chapter of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force on cases. After about eight searches, Jordan got a call that changed everything.

"They called and said, 'We've got another warrant. Do you want to come? It's kind of a high-profile case, but we can't tell you what it is,'" he recalled. When

Jordan and Bear arrived at a house,

Willow is always up for fetch in her dual role as a "therapy" dog for the task force.



PHOTO COURTESY OF RON BURLESON



Todd Jordan and Bear

it turned out the owner was former Subway spokesman Jared Fogle. "The dog found a thumb drive in Jared's house, and it was full of evidence," he said. "That point is when my business basically took off. Everybody wanted one of these dogs."

Now, Jordan has trained 41 electronics-detection K-9s who are currently working around the country to protect children. While the dogs are training with Jordan in Indiana, they go out on search warrants but also train at facilities like Hope Center, which shelters victims of human trafficking.

Jordan exclusively trains Labs not only because of their terrific noses, food motivation, and willingness to work in any environment if they trust their handler, but because the dogs are not intimidating to the general public. For instance, at Hope Center, the dogs double as therapy dogs for people who have survived abuse. "Not one of them is intimidated by the dogs," he said. "I had one girl just start bawling when she saw the dog. It's a comfort aspect for the victims."

Jordan said it's rewarding working with the Labs and hearing about success stories from handlers. "Every day, my phone rings or a text message comes in and it's the handler saying, 'Hey, we were just on a search warrant. The dog found three devices that were missed by investigators,'" he said.

He's glad Burleson and Willow have already worked together so successfully. "They're a great team," he said. "They're doing some fantastic things in San Diego." 🐾

For more information, visit www.electronicdetectionk9.com.



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. 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.