

Canine Crime

Arson dogs put the collar on criminals

by Jen Reeder

Dalmatians may be the dog traditionally associated with firefighting, but it is a Labrador retriever that's featured for the National Fire Dog Monument in Washington, D.C. The bronze statue, unveiled on October 24, 2013, honors accelerant detection canine teams – a.k.a. arson dog teams – by showcasing a Lab and her handler proudly and loyally making eye contact after a job well-done.

The canine model for the statue is a black Lab named Sadie, an arson dog who was named the Law Enforcement/Arson Dog of the Year at the 2011 American Humane Association Hero Dog Awards. Sadie and her handler, Agent Jerry Means of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, work together to find suspected arsonists. Like other arson dogs – which are typically Labs or Lab mixes – Sadie is trained to signal when she smells accelerants such as lighter fluid, kerosene, or gasoline. Finding these samples helps investigators prosecute suspected arsonists and put them behind bars. Means and Sadie's predecessor, a black Lab named Erin, investigated around 800 fire scenes together.

Means says Labs are uniquely suited to work as arson dogs, since in addition to their sensitive noses, work drive, and willingness to please, they are also a "people-friendly dog." After searching a fire scene and finding accelerants,

Investigator David Ward and his partner K-9 Callie with the Fresno County (California) Fire Protection District investigate a fire scene. K-9 Callie will indicate to her handler when she smells something that could be used to start a fire.
Photo courtesy of State Farm Insurance



Solvers



K-9 Sadie poses beside the National Fire Dog Monument.
Photo courtesy of Jerry Means



K-9 Tana.
Photo courtesy of State Farm Insurance

arson dogs are sometimes taken out into the crowd of onlookers to seek out the arsonist.

"It's a Labrador retriever, so people don't freak out and take off running from it – it's a Lab!" Means says. "If we're doing a general walk around the crowd, people end up petting the dog. I've had the dog alerting on the suspect's shoes, and the suspect's reaching down, petting the dog and telling his buddy, 'Oh look – the dog likes me,' and the dog is alerting on him and we're trying to figure out how to collect the shoes as evidence now."

Arson dogs like Sadie also do a lot of public education about fire safety with demonstrations in schools or for church or scout groups, typically 40 or 50 each year.

"One day [arson dogs] are on a fire scene where somebody's been killed, and the next day they're surrounded by fifth graders asking questions and wanting to meet them," Means says. "Their demeanor just comes shining through."

Means says Sadie is a "team player" who is very friendly and docile. When she's not working, she's a member of his family (arson dogs live at home with their handlers), and he likes to reward her hard work with walks and visits to the dog park. "She's a social butterfly. She runs from dog to dog at the dog park and you have to almost drag her away from there," he says.

Means is proud that Austin Weishel, who sculpted the National Fire Dog Monument "Ashes to Answers," used Sadie as his model, and that arson dogs and their handlers have a place to visit that honors their commitment to public safety. "She's been an incredible ambassador for the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, for the State of Colorado, and for Labrador retrievers – showing other people that they're out there working and making a difference in their communities," Means says. "And they really ask for



Austin Weishel sculpts “Ashes to Answers” using K-9 Sadie as the model.
Photo by Stephanie Buchholtz

Officer Jerry Means and K-9 Sadie offer demonstrations at a fund-raiser for a local Lab rescue group.
Photo courtesy of Jerry Means



nothing in return. ‘If you’ll pat me on the head and show me that you love me, then I’ll be there for you 24/7.’ That’s essentially what she’s done.”

K-9 Sadie is a graduate of the State Farm Arson Dog program, which has sponsored the training of arson dogs and handlers since 1993. State Farm Insurance, which co-sponsored the National Fire Dog Monument with the nonprofit American Humane Association, only trains Labs or Lab mixes in the arson dog program. The dogs are acquired from Lab rescues or shelters, or often from disability and guide dog organizations with pups that would be more suited as arson dogs, according to Heather Paul, State Farm arson dog coordinator.

“They’re too energetic, they’re young, they have a very strong food and prey drive, and those are the dogs we want. We want them to go into a fire scene and just be ready to go,” Paul says.

Arson dog recruits spend two or three months with a trainer in Maine, then handlers fly out for about a month of training with their new partners. They come from all over the country – more than 325 dogs have been placed in 44 states over the past two decades. The cost to train an arson dog team is about \$25,000, but Paul says it’s a valuable investment because arson dogs are so effective at bringing criminals to justice by being able to pinpoint evidence.

“The prosecution rate goes up typically from twelve percent without a dog to fifty percent or more with a canine,” she says. “They become like little superheroes for their communities.”

She says arson dogs are not harmed by working so frequently with accelerants – most retire and live into old age – and receive top-notch veterinary care; in addition, handlers are trained to care for any injuries that may arise. However, she is often asked why they don't wear booties to protect their feet – they don't wear them because their feet become tough. And for another obvious reason: "If you've ever tried to put booties on a dog, they do not like it.... We don't want them to go into a fire scene and focus entirely on trying to get the booties off their feet."

Paul says arson dog handlers love the new monument and how sculptor Weishel was able to portray the bond between handlers and their dogs. "He's able to capture the beauty of the Lab with that sculpture," Paul says. (Means jokes that another indication that Weishel did a good job is that at the sculpture's unveiling, many arson dogs attempted to sniff the bronze dog's rear end.)

Rose Rozmiarek, chief special agent at the Kansas State Fire Marshal's Office, attended the sculpture's dedication ceremony with her arson dog, K-9 Tana, a four-year-old Lab with white fur. "Having a canine as a partner – you can't ask for a better partner," Roziarek says, adding, "she's got some pretty good convictions under her collar."

Rozmiarek, who has worked in law enforcement for 30 years, decided to become an arson dog handler three years ago when her agency's handler retired. She didn't want her team to be without an arson dog since she knew how effective they are at reducing the time spent investigating a fire scene.

"With accelerant detection dogs, they put their noses down right where you need to be taking that sample. We don't have to completely dig the scene out for them to identify it – they can smell that odor through inches of debris," she says.

The dogs' accurate detection of "scent cones" cuts down on the number of samples investigators send to the lab, and also saves time in the lab since there may be only three samples as opposed to 15 or 20 when a human investigator makes an educated guess. (State Farm's Paul says each sample costs taxpayers \$30-\$60, so fewer samples saves money as well as time.)

Rozmiarek says Labs are well-suited to arson dog work because they love to please their handlers and because they are so food-motivated. Arson dogs are hand-fed by their handlers when they alert on accelerant, and handlers



Fire Investigator Russell Whitney and K-9 Daz with the Salt Lake City Fire Department.
Photo Courtesy of State Farm Insurance



K-9 Zoe inspects the National Fire Dog Monument with Officer Jack Barba.
Photo courtesy of State Farm Insurance


must train them with accelerant every day, even on vacations. To avoid false alerts or developing a routine, not only is the type of training varied each day, but the amount of food.

"Because we do food reward, Labradors are very good because of their ability to always want to eat, which is very important for us because we don't ever know when we'll have to go to a fire scene with them," she says.

Russell Whitney, a fire investigator for the Salt Lake City Fire Department, retired K-9 Star, a female black Lab, in July of 2013 after a dozen years as a successful arson dog. Star once processed about 40,000 square feet of a fire scene in about 20 minutes, alerted three times, and all three samples came back positive for gasoline.

Star and Whitney's new partner, K-9 Daz, also a female black Lab, get along fine at home, though their personalities are quite different. Daz is a bit of a "goofball," while Star is "somewhat of a princess."

"I can take her and walk through the nastiest fire scene out there, but if I'm walking her and there's a puddle on the sidewalk, she will step over and around it. 'Perish the thought that I get my paws wet' kind of thing," he says. But despite their differences, they share a trait common to all arson dogs: When it's time to work, they become extremely focused.

"They're phenomenal dogs – I'm still amazed watching them work," Whitney says. "I can't imagine doing my job without a K-9." 

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