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CSUN Police Services K-9 Unit: Community Policing with Paws and Claws

BY STEPHANIE COLMAN | MARCH 19TH, 2012 | CSUN BLOG

Weighing a mere 100 pounds, Officer Mitch is one of the smallest members of the California State University, Northridge Department of Police Services. He can outrun any of his fellow officers and holds one of the best search records in the department.

Officer Mitch is a dog.

The department currently has two K-9 teams: Mitch, a 4-year-old German shepherd, partnered with Officer Raymond Gonzalez, and Dozer, the 6-year-old German shepherd partner of Cpl. Tom Finnerty. As the newest dog on the team, some might consider Mitch a rookie. But this rookie, like all police dogs, comes with an impressive training resume.

"It's harder for a dog to become a police dog than for a human to become a police officer," said Gonzalez, referring to the detailed temperament and health screenings that take place in the initial stages of a dog's training.

Most working police dogs are imported from Germany and other European countries, where breeders select for specific temperament and physical characteristics that help police dogs meet the unique demands of the job. The dogs begin their training overseas with a sport called "Schutzhund," which combines obedience, tracking and protection – three skills that make up the core of police dog work.

Once the dog arrives in the United States and is paired with a handler, the team attends basic patrol school, where they refine their skills in human tracking, suspect apprehension and evidence tracking. Teams can then go on to "major" in narcotics or explosives detection, creating a cross-trained dog who can both work on patrol and respond to special-circumstance calls. Mitch is trained to sniff out five different illegal substances: marijuana, methamphetamine, heroin, cocaine and ecstasy. Dozer, who has been with the department for nearly four years, can detect 15

different types of explosives. The teams continue to train throughout their careers.

This specialty training comes at a cost, but not to the university. Each dog carries an \$8,500 price tag, not counting training.

"The department receives the dogs on a grant from the National Police Dog Foundation," said Capt. Alfredo Fernandez, administrator of the K-9 program. "They also pay for all the training."

To help raise money, the K-9 team holds an annual fundraiser at Maria's Italian Kitchen and will host a "Meet the Dogs" event on campus on April 25.

The K-9 Unit started in 2005 and plays a valuable role in the department's mission of community-based policing.

"Having a dog is a deterrent," said Gonzalez. "Word gets out that we have a narcotics dog and we do patrol and make traffic stops in a buffer area around campus."

The team also recently started doing random narcotics searches in both the campus housing and main campus mailrooms in a pro-active attempt to prevent the transport of narcotics through the mail.

A K-9 team not only serves as an effective crime deterrent, but the dog's specialized training, coupled with a superior sense of smell, helps officers work more efficiently.

"I can effectively search a building or a floor much quicker than six or seven officers," Gonzalez said. "All I need is one cover officer and my dog and we can do the work of six or seven guys trying to look for a burglary suspect."

The ability to send a dog to apprehend a suspect, who

is usually armed, also helps keep officers safe. Whereas human partners part ways at the end of their shifts, a K-9 officer is responsible for his partner 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

"You grow very attached to your dog," said Gonzalez. "It's your partner. You work together 12 hours a day and then on your time off, you're with your dog. You need that bond. When I need Mitch to focus on a narcotics search or we have a suspect situation, that bond needs to be there in order for us to work effectively as a team."

