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Dog goes from stray to patrolling county jail



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Layla Bohm
Apr 25, 2009 (Lodi News-Sentinel - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX)
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One day last fall, a dog was running through the streets of Lodi.

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The German Shepherd wasn't vicious, but the dog, which wasn't wearing a collar, was youthful, full of energy and didn't really like authority.

"We called him Jogger because he was a little hard to keep up with," Lodi Animal Services Supervisor Dianne Barney said with a laugh.

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That handful of a dog wound up in the animal shelter, where some pooches are euthanized because nobody will take them. The dogs are no longer small, cute puppies, and many have little training but plenty of bad habits.

But that particular dog, now named Ion, was one of the fortunate ones: He found his niche and is now one of the first two dogs to ever work patrol in the San Joaquin County Jail.

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Both dogs have already found a number of contraband items, Sheriff's spokesman Les Garcia said last month on the day the dogs were officially "sworn in." The dogs' mere presence alone also acts as a deterrent, he noted.

Ion's new job thrills Jayne Nielsen, a volunteer for German Shepherd Rescue of Northern California, who personally rescues between 40 and 55 dogs a year.

"That's when everything I do is worthwhile. We celebrate every dog, but when a dog goes to an organization to utilize their talents, it's great,"

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Nielsen said.

One of the dogs she found at the Stockton animal shelter in 2002 is now working at the Capitol in Washington as part of a search-and-rescue team, she said. Ion is the second of her dogs to go into law enforcement work.

When Ion arrived at the animal shelter, he was held for five business days, the legal requirement to give owners time to reclaim their dog. Ion actually stayed at the shelter an extra week, Nielsen said, because she had so many dogs she was trying to place.

Shelter workers called Nielsen, something they try to do when they get purebreds, Barney said.

Nielsen arrived and checked out the dog, which an animal services officer said was quite rambunctious. She noticed that he focused immediately on a toy.

Law enforcement dog trainers look for animals that can focus on their target, so Nielsen contacted the San Francisco Sheriff's Department, which has a dog training and placement program. Deputy Dave Dorn, who has been testing and training dogs since 1998, checked out Ion and agreed that he had potential.

In his initial evaluation, Dorn checks a dog's speed, hunting drive and overall drive. Many dogs aren't up to the challenge. Of 37 he recently tested, only five made the cut, but then all of those five failed the next test involving enclosed spaces, meaning they wouldn't do well as police dogs.

The dogs that don't go on for more training are placed with a rescue group to be adopted.

During further testing and training, Dorn said he takes dogs into jails to make sure they can handle loud noises and yelling without getting aggressive. He keeps the dogs for six to eight weeks before trying to match them with an officer, called a handler.

The handler and dog then go through a four-week course put on by the San Francisco Sheriff's Department. The dogs are then able to go to work, though it takes several more months before they are certified, meaning they've had enough training and testing that their drug finds can be used in court.

Law enforcement agencies who buy purebred dogs for that specific purpose typically spend up to \$6,000 for an untrained dog, then another \$5,000 to get it trained, Dorn said. His costs are less than half that amount.

"It's saving law enforcement money, and it's saving dogs' lives," he said. "It's fun for the dog to be doing what he's doing, and they're in a great home with the handlers 24/7."

Five dogs are currently working for his department, and all five were rescues, he said.

He, Nielsen and Barney all said they've seen more abandoned dogs than ever, attributed to the increase in foreclosed homes. Shelters see a surprising number of purebred dogs, Barney said.

Nielsen is constantly trying to keep up with the dogs who need homes, and she hates the alternative.

"Shelters were built back when the population was smaller. Now the shelters are the last to get funding. They're like the prisons -- they get all these intakes and no place to put them," she said. "Unfortunately, when

they can't find owners, the dogs have to be put down."

So watching Ion's progress was an even greater reward for Nielsen.

"In a case like this, where Ion went on to do bigger and better things, it makes me even more thrilled," she said. "When you see a dog that has those kinds of abilities, it makes you feel good."

Contact reporter Layla Bohm at layla@lodinews.com.

About German Shepherd Rescue of Northern California

The group formed in 2001 and has since rescued more than 2,000 dogs. It covers 19 counties in California's Bay and Central Valley areas, ranging from Fresno to San Francisco to Sacramento.

When a volunteer takes in a dog, the animal goes directly to a veterinarian to be checked and spayed or neutered. The rescue group pays for any medical care. Volunteers also try to find permanent homes for the dogs, working with the potential owners to make sure they are compatible.

Potential owners fill out a questionnaire about their home, family and current and past pets. Once they adopt a dog, they pay a fee that helps cover the animal's previous medical costs, and also sign forms regarding the rescue group's right to take the dog back if it's not working out.

Like other dog rescue organizations, the non-profit group occasionally holds adoption days at pet food stores. It also lists available dogs, as well as contact information, online at www.savegsd.org.

Sources: Volunteer Jayne Nielsen, and the group's Web site at [savegsd.org](http://www.savegsd.org)

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