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Sgt. Josh Cook of the WVU Police Department walks Ginger, left, and Bella. The dogs' official names are Bella Milady (Bella) and Adirondac Lady Mountaineer (Ginger). Photo by Brian Persinger, WVU Photographic Services



# K-9 UNIT BOOSTS MISSION OF WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY POLICE

BY DAN SHRENSKY

WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY, UNIVERSITY RELATIONS/NEWS



MORGANTOWN, W.V. – It's 4:30 p.m. on a Monday at St. Marys Church and the girls from Girl Scout Troop No. 54520 are giddy with anticipation about the arrival of two special visitors.

In a squad car outside, Sgt. Josh Cook from the West Virginia University Police Department unloads three wooden boxes with circular holes cut in the tops to help demonstrate the skills of Ginger and Bella, two bomb-sniffing golden retrievers who represent half of the department's K-9 unit.

Once inside, Cook will place a small pouch of gunpowder inside one of the boxes and let each dog display its uncanny skill.

It's visits like these that demonstrate a glimpse of the value bomb dogs Bella and Ginger and drug dogs Blek and Dexter have brought to the WVU Police Department and the entire university over the last few years. Whether it's a specific detection duty or general public relations, the dogs have been invaluable in not only helping keep WVU's campus safe but also serving as lovable liaisons between the police and community.

But back at the church, the action is ready to begin.

First up is Bella, a 6-year-old who greets the kids with the boundless enthusiasm and friendliness that characterizes the breed.





As the children surround and stroke the eager-to-please Bella, it's hard to say who's more excited about the visit – the children or the dog.

Eventually coaxed away from the girls, Bella makes short work of her exercise. It takes her seconds to sniff each box and identify which one contains the gun powder, indicated by a look to Cook and an abrupt but deliberate change in posture to the sitting position.

Having found the powder, it's reward time for the apt pupil. Cook lavishes praise on Bella and tosses a tennis ball to her. She gleefully romps around the room with her prize. While Bella is distracted, the children re-arrange the boxes but the results of the next test are no different – Bella identifies the box with the powder in seconds and is rewarded with more praise and another toss of the tennis ball.

Next it's Ginger's turn, and the only difference between the two is their approach.

Ginger, a 1-year-old, is willing to sniff and accept the attention of the Girl Scouts but quickly turns her focus to Cook. Like Bella, her nose leads her to the gunpowder quickly, even through several set-ups of the boxes. She

also finds the powder when it's hidden behind a trash can in a corner of the church's expansive rec room.

Although the results of the exhibition are the same with both dogs, their personalities are distinctly different.

"Bella is kind of a dog who goes to work and, when we go home, is just a dog," Cook, a life-long dog owner and lover, said. "Ginger is always in work mode. She just wants to work."

Both dogs have plenty of work ahead of them. In a few minutes, Cook will take Bella and Ginger to the 14,000-seat WVU Coliseum where they'll perform a sweep for explosives before a sold-out Mountaineers men's basketball game. And on any given day, Blek, a six-year-old Labrador retriever and Dexter, a two-year-old Belgian Malinois mix, could be sweeping a dormitory or campus building in search of drugs.

With each task the dogs reinforce their value as both crime-stoppers and goodwill magnets.

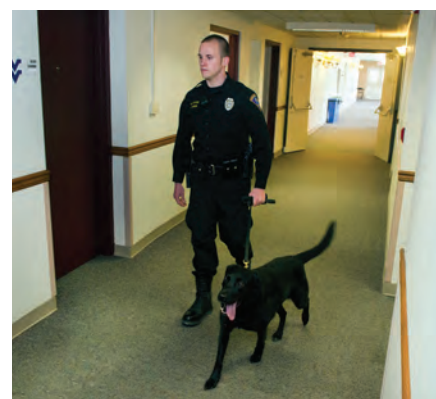
"They've become a part of the WVU community," Bob Roberts, WVU Police chief, said. "When you first get into these things, the fear that you have is, 'How will people react to these canines?' We've been very well received with





**ABOVE:** Ginger, a 1-year-old golden retriever, says, handler Josh Cook, is all business while Bella (background) has more of a people-oriented disposition. Photo by Brian Persinger, WVU Photographic Services

**LEFT:** Girl Scouts: Sgt. Josh Cook of the West Virginia University Police Department and Bella the bomb dog – full name Bella Milady – visit with girls from Girl Scout Troop No. 54520 of Morgantown, W.V. From left to right are Hailey McClain, Nadia DeGraffenreid, Jessica Walker, Josie Kemp-Rye, Zoe Vannoy, Victoria Shrensky and Sgt. Cook. Photo by M.G. Ellis/WVU Photography



ours. A lot of that goes back to Sgt. Cook and his efforts and outreach programs.”

The dogs’ role in crime prevention is equally important.

Each year, Milan Puskar Stadium hosts seven home football games, which typically draw between 50,000-60,000 fans and transform Morgantown into the state’s largest city. WVU’s student population is nearly 30,000 and the campus is the site of numerous events with large crowds.

Along with pre-game sweeps for all football and basketball games, Bella and Ginger do explosives sweeps for other large events such as Commencement and sniff out sites that will be visited by dignitaries. The dogs proved invaluable for visits from Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and former President Bill Clinton, who have been on campus in recent years.

In addition, Bella and Ginger, who are among only a handful of explosives dogs in the state, help secure venues all over West Virginia. The dogs recently visited nine schools in a system in the southern part of the state as a response to bomb threats.

“It’s a good comfort to know they’re here, particularly

when you’re going through a major event where you’ve got 60,000 people,” Roberts said.

Zach Camden, who handles Blek, and Travis Snuffer, Dexter’s handler, complete the Unit.

Snuffer says the drug dogs make routine patrols of WVU buildings, nearly on a daily basis and often pinpointing one of WVU’s 13 residence halls.

“Nine out of 10 times, we’ll get a call from one of the (Resident Assistants) who think they smell a controlled substance coming from one of the rooms,” Snuffer said. “Dexter can not only smell out a room but, once he’s in a room, he can detect where the drugs are being kept.”

Blek and Dexter have also been known to locate controlled substances such as marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamine in vehicles.

Cook says the amount of drugs found is usually small and the mere presence of Blek and Dexter assists the Department in its “serve and protect” mission.

“It’s a deterrent, that’s the way we look at it,” Cook said. “People see the dogs and they know, ‘Hey, last week (the police) busted so-and-so. We’re not going to smoke weed or bring it onto campus.’ ”



**LEFT:** Ginger, a 1-year-old golden retriever, is part of a line of working dogs from upstate New York known as Adirondac golden retrievers.

**BELOW:** Dexter and handler Travis Snuffer.  
Photos by Brian Persinger,  
WVU Photographic Services



The idea of adding dogs to the department arose in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. All around the U.S., the nation re-focused and reinforced the idea of security and safety. It was no different at WVU. Along with acquiring a disciplined, effective working bomb dog, Roberts wanted an animal that would also be good with people.

The WVU Police Department's first dog was Raleigh, a golden retriever who operated under Lt. Bob Tucker. Raleigh served for several years before health problems forced her to retire.

With Raleigh gone and Tucker transferred to another unit, Cook explored the possibility of using Bella, whom he'd raised as a pet. Bella seemingly had the right qualities – a friendly temperament, good blood lines and intelligence – but needed special training to become a bomb dog.

Enter Kathy Holbert, who owns and operates Chiodo Kennels in Philippi, W.V., and has a background in the military and law enforcement. She molded Bella into a top-notch bomb dog and worked with Cook to help him train Ginger himself.

Golden retrievers, Holbert says, have all the qualities necessary for police work, including an instinctive drive,

physical structure, a keen sense of smell and agility.

Other breeds have some of those characteristics, Holbert said, but, “herding breeds like golden retrievers bring all these features to the table.”

Equally important is the breed's personality, she said.

“It's also important to have breeds the public is not intimidated by like Labradors and golden retrievers. Pit bulls are some of the best dogs to train but, because of their reputation in the eyes of the public, they aren't always used in sniffing duties,” she said.

Working with Cook and Holbert, Bella quickly blossomed. She was recognized for her contributions to law enforcement with a bronze medal from the American Kennel Club's awards for Canine Excellence in Law Enforcement in 2011, one of 10 dogs in the nation to be honored.

“That was a real high point in my career – to have a dog who was able to achieve that,” Cook said. “Thousands and thousands of dogs are reviewed for the award.”

Ginger may someday attain similar status. She's from a line of golden retrievers that has been bred as a working dog.

“She's genetically built for this kind of work,” Cook says.

Cook works with both dogs at least once a day, sometimes





using the boxes to hide gun powder and sometimes putting a pouch in a random spot. With each find, the dogs are rewarded with excessive praise and a toss of a tennis ball.

But with Ginger, says Cook, "I decided to try to take it to another level."

Cook has trained Ginger to detect explosives in crowds and walks her among the fans outside the football stadium and inside at the basketball arena.

Camden and Snuffer also work with their dogs daily, keeping them sharp with repetitive detection exercises that they see as play.

To further hone their skills, each dog is tested and certified at least once a year by the Mountaineer Working Dog Association.

Other than food, occasional medical checkups and supplies, such as bullet proof vests, expenses for the dogs are low, particularly when compared to what they deliver.

"The return, if you add the public relations into it, is just awesome," said Cook. "It gives the department a good image, plus, when you are doing your sweeps, you make everything safe."

The K-9 Unit has exceeded the vision of Roberts, who

credits Cook with its success.

"I never saw it as becoming a unit," Roberts said. "I saw it as the explosives canines.

And then we added the next and we added the next one ... it kind of evolved into a unit.

"A lot of the credit goes to Josh. He's really interested in it. He's worked really hard and has been dedicated to the program. It's now grown to this size and we've moved that specialization into one supervisor's domain.

"Right now I think we've got an excellent team. These guys are committed to these dogs and committed to what they do. It shows when they're out working. We've got a good program." ■

