

CARRIER'S K-9 ACADEMY



Top: Hartford, CT Branch 86 member Bryan Colletti trains Nadja.

Above: Bianca, a patrol and explosive-detection dog trained and donated by K-9 Crime Stoppers, won first place at a police service dog competition.

In their routes, letter carriers help keep their communities safe by watching out for trouble and lending a hand when necessary. **Bryan Colletti** devotes many evenings and days off to community safety, too—the Hartford, CT Branch 86 member trains police dogs and donates them to K-9 units.

While the popular myth is that dogs don't like letter carriers, Colletti and canines seem made for each other. A rambunctious pet German Shepherd named Augie launched Colletti's dog training career 20 years ago when he took the dog in as a pet.

"He was a handful and a half," Colletti said. "Chewing everything, climbing on everything and just a pain in the butt. He needed training and so did I."

Colletti sought advice from professional trainers, and as he transformed Augie into a well-behaved and skilled dog, he discovered his own talent for dog-handling. Soon Augie was competing in "dog sports" competitions, and Colletti's skills caught the eye of East Hartford, CT police officers, who saw him training Augie in a park. Their police department had no funding for a dog trainer—would Colletti train a police dog for their department?

Colletti took on the challenge, finding time to train two dogs for the East Hartford police after work while raising three children. He loved the experience so much that he founded his own charity, K-9 Crime Stoppers, to provide trained dogs to police departments at a reduced cost or for free. Since training a law enforcement dog can cost as much as \$50,000, starting with a purebred puppy worth between \$5,000 and \$8,000, Colletti's efforts go a long way for small-town police departments with limited resources.

Before training dogs, Colletti had to train himself. "The only way to learn this type of training is by doing it," he said. He sought out top professional dog trainers from around the world

and worked closely with them, learning how to read the capabilities of each dog and how to teach them the skills they would need as police dogs.

"You can watch YouTube videos all day and never learn this work," he said. "You have to get dirty, get hurt and sacrifice to succeed. It's only fair to the dog that you know what you are doing before you ask the dog to do something for you."

A good trainer approaches each dog differently. "Being that each dog is unique in temperament," Colletti explained, "you must employ your knowledge and experience to customize the training to the dog's needs—much like a coach working with a young athlete."

Colletti trains mostly German Shepherds, Dutch Shepherds and Belgian Malinois for typical K-9 duties such as search and rescue, tracking suspects and sniffing out drugs or explosives. Some dogs are trained to confront dangerous suspects, risking their lives to protect officers.

The dogs start their training as puppies. "This ensures that their quality is top-notch," he said, "and therefore everything good and bad about the dog is known quite well to me. That makes the transfer to the handler a breeze."

"I think it's great that someone like Bryan takes the time out of their day to do something they love and help us keep the community safe," said Officer Dan Gagnon, a K-9 handler at the Ledyard, CT Police Department. Gagnon handles Ringo, a patrol and narcotics dog Colletti trained and donated when the Ledyard police department had no fund for a dog.

"I guarantee there are K-9 units that would not have dogs at all if it weren't for Bryan," Gagnon said.

K-9 Crime Stoppers, a non-profit organization, relies on volunteers—professional trainers, police officers and others—and donations of money, equipment and training space. Colletti and other trainers use a loft space provided by a local building owner as a training area.



The loft is cluttered with obstacles and unusual objects to challenge the dogs and train them to adapt quickly to unfamiliar environments.

Colletti's three children and two stepchildren, who range in age from seven to 20, help with training as well as caring for the dogs. "They provide very important socializing with kids. Dogs must accept kids and trust them," he said. "My kids work and feed the puppies. Play with them constantly and tire them out. They act like lost kids in the woods so we can search with the puppies. They provide critical encouragement to the younger pups just taken from the litter."

The dual role that these dogs must play—friendly toward the public they serve, yet aggressive toward criminals—makes training police dogs challenging.

"I have to train and build a warrior, yet still keep the dog social enough to demo for children and schools. It's a fine line to balance. I specialize in just that—working the aggression levels of a dog and providing the dog the techniques in battle to help the dog overcome the most violent and determined of criminals."

The training involves specific behavior requirements for the dogs, so it takes time and effort. For instance, a dog trained to search for drugs or weapons is taught to quietly indicate that it has found something, rather than grabbing it with its mouth. This keeps the dog safe and avoids spoiling evidence.

Several of Colletti's dogs have won awards for their service. Search-and-rescue dogs he trained worked in the rubble of the World Trade Center following the

Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Though he has managed to carry mail by day and train dogs by night for two decades, Colletti says it is getting harder.

"The Post Office used to be a lot more flexible in years past with regard to my charity and community work," he said. "In spite of our current struggles countrywide that make our lives difficult, we mailmen and women are still vital parts of our communities. We just do it more stressed out than ever before, and exhausted.

"I still find time for my charity; I just produce fewer dogs now.

"With the world in constant conflict, police dogs are in worldwide demand on a scale never seen before," he added. As a result, finding well-bred dogs with good potential has become more difficult, and training the ones he can find is a bigger challenge.

Still, Colletti's energy for doing good hasn't faded. He's also leading the effort in his state by the Vietnam Dog Handlers Association to gain approval for the Postal Service to issue a "War Dog" stamp honoring the role dogs played in the Vietnam War.

After 20 years, Colletti's focus for K-9 Crime Stoppers is shifting. "It is my mission now to start making this charity viable for the future," Colletti said. "Our goal is to open a facility at a local college where I can provide more police dogs to communities in need."

For more information, contact K-9 Crime Stoppers at P.O. Box 311154, Newington, CT 06131. **PR**



Police and rescue units used service dogs (top) as they worked in the rubble of the World Trade Center following the 9/11 attacks, including two that Colletti trained (above).

Colletti's children help the dogs become accustomed to civilians, as police dogs are expected to be friendly toward the public, yet aggressive toward criminals. Below is an old family photograph of Isabella and Lucciella Colletti with future Manchester, CT police dog Dibbs.

