Missing Pieces

Written by Rhonda Dyer

November 2017

For the last 30 years, I have been looking for missing pieces.

At the Northern California Innocence Project (NCIP), our job is to search for the missing pieces of evidence in our cases that will help bring innocent clients home.

But since 1986, I've also been searching for missing pieces in a different capacity.

It started out innocently enough; I had purchased a cute boxer puppy because I wanted a running partner. About three weeks later, I noticed a poster in the locker room at Tandem Computers, where I was working, that encouraged people to volunteer as handlers for Search and Rescue dogs. I called the number on the poster and after several days and about 25 additional telephone calls, I finally got a call back from a woman who invited me to attend a California Rescue Dog Association (CARDA) training the next weekend.

That first puppy, Juba, became the first boxer to be certified in Search and Rescue in the Americas. And that first journey through Juba's CARDA certification was the beginning of what would become my life's work.

Juba and I searched together for nine years.

Next came my boxer Tanis; we searched together for 11 years. After Tanis, came a 10-year journey with my boxer Deja. After 165 searches (the most of any dog in CARDA), Deja was awarded the American Kennel Club's ACE Award for extraordinary service in the category of Search and Rescue, an honor to pay tribute to dogs that better the lives of people and whole communities.

When Deja was seven, I found myself, yet again, looking for the "next" dog. This time, I found Dakar, who was distantly related to all the previous boxers that I'd owned. "Dak" searched until 2014 and deployed on 162 searches before she unexpectedly died at only seven years old.

Having searched for 28 years at this point, I had been giving a lot of thought as to whether I wanted to train another search dog. I had a decision to make. I was 66 years old---"did I really want to train another dog?" The short answer was yes. Simply put, without a dog by my side and a search to embark on, there was a missing piece in my life.



Rhonda with Senga

Senga arrived from Connecticut in 2014 and has been certified for almost 2 years now.

I have been working part time at NCIP for more than a decade, and most of what I do is supporting and maintaining the case management system, which tracks every piece of mail we receive and every step we take in our cases. NCIP has tracked and received over 45,000 pieces of client mail. We answer every single letter we receive and I play an important part in making sure that the correspondence and information therein, is recorded in our system.

Though deploying on search and rescue missions may seem drastically different from tracking case information and data, they actually share a lot in common. They are both, in a sense, forms of investigation to uncover the truth.

On a search and rescue mission, a subtle scent that Senga picks up could lead us down the path to finding a missing person and reuniting a family.



Rhonda and Senga with the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue Team

Meanwhile, at NCIP, the data I help to maintain aids our team in reinvestigating cases and uncovering evidence needed to free innocent people and to reunite them with their loved ones.

On every search and rescue mission I accompany Senga, patiently waiting for her to pick up the scent that points us in the right direction.

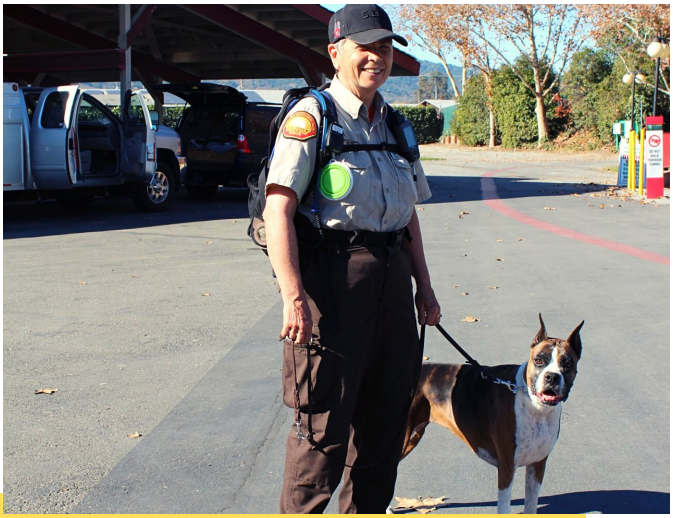
Meanwhile, at the NCIP office, Senga accompanies me, sitting patiently by my side, as I collect data to draw meaningful conclusions about our work.

Most recently, Senga and I were at the Santa Rosa Tubbs fire scene, where we assisted in the search for hundreds of missing people. It's the third fire scene Senga has worked this year, but not the first tragedy that I've worked as a Search and Rescue dog handler.

Notable search missions that my dogs and I have deployed on include: the Loma Prieta earthquake, the search for Polly Klaas, the search for Laci Peterson, the Oakland Hills fire, the search for Sierra Lamar, and the Ghostship fire.

There is a very strange dichotomy that happens with dogs that search for missing people or human remains. On the one hand, you want to jump, yell, laugh and cheer that this dog you've trained for so many hours and years has been successful. On the other hand, the devastation of what we find is sometimes beyond belief, and the tragedy is unimaginable.

Similarly, in innocence work, when we obtain freedom for an innocent client, we feel the urge to jump for joy. But then we remember, we don't have the ability to give someone back lost years or to heal them from their trauma.



Rhonda with Dak

Working with various people at NCIP over the past 11 years has given me a very different perspective on the criminal legal process than the one I started with, growing up as a "Navy Brat" in a military family.

Search and Rescue falls under the jurisdiction of the Sheriff of each respective county. The entire operation functions from a law enforcement perspective. Given my background and my work with Search and Rescue, I was used to the law enforcement perspective.

Like many, I had notions about the criminal justice system that simply are not true. I know now that the criminal justice system makes mistakes and I'm honored to have a part in finding the missing pieces that lead us to the truth, both through my work with Search and Rescue and with NCIP.



Rhonda with Widget