

# Encouraging canine can-do

Water-rescue dogs focus of woman's training efforts

By Sylvia Mendoza

SPECIAL TO THE UNION-TRIBUNE

When members of Niki Burgan's family died in a small-plane crash off the Carlsbad coast in 2007, she was convinced that search-and-rescue dogs could have recovered her stepfather's body.

The bodies of her mother and sister were found, but her stepfather's body was never recovered. Burgan has been on a mission ever since.

"I'd like to see a lifeguard dog program develop like the K-9 units for police officers," said Burgan, a California senior park aide who oversees special projects such as the Carlsbad Beach Fest.

"Why couldn't lifeguards have canine backup for safety and rescue and retrieval? They would be one more tool in the public safety tool belt," she said.

Burgan, who has earned search-and-rescue certification through the National Association for Search and Rescue, has worked throughout California, and on other missing-person searches since 2001, including those for Danielle van Dam and Amber Dubois in San Diego County.

With the support of the California Department of Parks and Recreation, Burgan has volunteered to train her own dogs to start a program to rescue drowning victims — and search for missing people in the ocean.

Rummy, 6, is a yellow Labrador retriever in the NASAR certification process. Bivy, a 9-year-old Australian cattle dog, is already certified for search and rescue, and was used in the van Dam case. Burgan's friend and assistant Sandra Dickerman and her black Lab, Coasta, are also part of the team.



Rummy carries a rescue buoy during training at San Elijo State Beach. For their own safety, the dogs wear "float" jackets that are designed to allow natural movement. The jackets include the insignia patch "California State Parks Lifeguard."

Parks and Recreation.

"It's a volunteer community outreach program that highlights the importance of aquatic safety," he said. "Eventually, we may be able to use them with bluff collapse searches and more. Niki would be on call if we needed her dogs."

Training the dogs involves a minimum of three days a week at Moonlight State Beach or San Elijo State Beach in Encinitas, for several hours at a time. The dogs cannot be in a controlled area, Burgan said.

"They have to be OK around people, distraction and action — and still be able to focus on the

coats," or red life jackets from Ruffwear, an Oregon company, that have the insignia: "California State Parks Lifeguard." Designed to allow natural movement, they are lightweight so the dogs can go farther and longer without fatigue.

During one training session, Dickerman held the dogs still by gripping the handles on the backs of the jackets as Burgan headed out past the surf break. Burgan signaled, and Dickerman released the dogs. Rummy raced out with a rescue tube attached to his lifeguard jacket. He pulled Burgan in.

San Diego police Officer

"Niki can morph the program into more than just water rescue assistance," he said. "There are sea wall collapses, people trapped on rocks and in boats. They can pick up on scents quickly to track and can definitely retrieve equipment."

In the meantime, some businesses have stepped up to help, Burgan said. Indiana-based Eagle Pack has donated dog food. Hansen's Surf Shop in Encinitas donated wet suits.

"It's a small investment for a large endeavor," said La Tessieri, Hansen's office manager. "If the dogs can save even one life, the program's worth it."

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