





BY NANCY CROWE

# WORKING LIKE A DOG

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Each day, Northeast Indiana's workers complete a variety of tasks in public safety, healthcare, education, agricultural, social service and other fields. And we're just talking about the dogs.

Granted, all canines lucky enough to have homes have their work cut out for them. There are tears to dry and delivery drivers to tell off. But many have undergone specialized training to detect evidence, apprehend suspects, find lost people, open doors for the disabled, comfort the grieving and keep farms functioning. Their partnerships with their human handlers are borne of repetition, persistence and empathy. Meet a few.

## GAME CHANGERS

**Bella** the bloodhound's owners surrendered her after losing their jobs. Then, in the hope she could find a happier future, they let the National Police Bloodhound Association

know a possible new recruit was at a New Jersey animal shelter.

Around the same time, Fort Wayne Police Sgt. Bob Theurer contacted the NPBA about adding a bloodhound to the K9 division.

Bella, gifted to the police department by the NPBA, ran her first trail the day Theurer brought her to Fort Wayne. "With no training whatsoever, she picked the right scent to follow," he recalled. "It was pure instinct."

Bella, now 8, is the FWPD's main trailing dog. She once followed a 14-hour-old trail to locate an elderly woman with dementia.

Her nose never stops, Theurer says. Indeed, as soon as he lets Bella out of her crate in his office, everything in her path—the floor, a visitor and an officer she bounds over to greet—gets a quick inspection.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Bella the bloodhound

## AGILITY

Whether you are a prize-winning poodle, a super-athletic shorthaired pointer or a perp-nabbing Belgian Malinois, chances are good you've been schooled. And it probably involved agility training.

Dogs dash through tunnels, weave around poles, jump hurdles and more at the direction of the owner or handler within a set amount of time.

Agility has become a sophisticated sport with many rules and regulations.

One place where dogs and their people can get started is the **Fort Wayne Obedience Training Club**, which was founded in 1946 and calls the Allen County Fairgrounds home. The all-volunteer club includes about 200 members and their families. Puppy and adult dog classes on scent work, tracking, therapy dog training and more are offered in addition to agility.

"I like to call agility 'obedience on the fly,'" says Steve Wheeler, club president.

Obedience doesn't just mean keeping the dog under your control. "We start our classes with a real simple exercise called 'Watch me' to get the dog to look at you," Wheeler says. "You've got to become the center of your dog's universe. It's not just 'sits' and 'downs.' It's the communication you have with your dog."

It is setting expectations and establishing trust. But it's also not all work and no play.

"You just have to remember: It's supposed to be fun for you and the dog both," Wheeler says. [fwotc.com](http://fwotc.com)

The officer, David Boles, was partnered with **Tempo**, a German shepherd from the Netherlands. Tempo was trained in narcotics detection as well as tracking, building search, article search and area search. He was also trained in apprehending suspects, though some give up once they know a dog is there.

K9 units get called to high-priority runs such as armed robberies and burglaries in progress. They can search if a door is open that shouldn't be. "Whenever we think a dog could be used, we head that way," Boles says, estimating 95 percent of the dog's work involves his nose. Payment for getting the job done is a tug toy made of repurposed fire hose.

Being able to find what others cannot—especially if they've given up or don't even know to look—is the greatest reward of working with Tempo, Boles says. "He can do a vast number of things. Just by him being there, it's a game changer."

Tempo, 8, has since retired and lives with Boles and his family, saying good night to the kids every night. "He'll spend the rest of his days being loved on and relaxing," Boles says.

Officers and dogs train as teams. Boles trained and is now partnered with **Shadow**, a young, social German shepherd-Belgian Malinois. "I'm learning her language," Boles says—when she needs to get out and run, when she needs a potty break and more. "It'll take a good year for us to click, but she is a good dog and loves to work."

The teams also undergo monthly maintenance training. Theurer, who has been with the K9 division since 1996, has developed training that taps into the hunting instincts in the dogs' bloodlines.

The day-to-day relationship between handlers and dogs is "unbelievably special," he says. The dogs don't complain. "You can tell them anything you want and they won't tell your secrets."

"And they listen without interrupting," Boles adds.

## OPENING DOORS

At 12, a guy likes a little independence. **Benton**, a 3-year-old golden retriever from Canine Companions Inc., puts that within reach of Steven Parker Jr.

Steven was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, a brittle bone disease his doctors originally diagnosed as terminal. Yet here he is, starting sixth grade at Woodside Middle School, getting about in an electric wheelchair and missing very little of what goes on around him.

He and his family—mom, Becky Parker, younger twin sisters Sidney and Bailey and dad, Steven—first visited the nonprofit CCI's training center near Columbus, Ohio, a few years ago. But the timing for getting a service dog never worked until last year. Steven Jr. and his dad spent two weeks in Ohio training Benton.

"It was an eye-opening experience about what the dog can actually do," the senior Parker recalls.

The CCI program is demanding, he says, both of the dogs—very few graduate to placement in a home—and the humans who would take them on. Written and command tests were required before father and son could bring Benton home.

"It was like school, but with dogs," Steven Jr. says.

"Which is so much better," his mom adds with a smile.

Benton retrieves dropped objects and can bring specific items, such as Steven Jr.'s favorite toy, on command. He opens doors by pulling on attached ropes and can turn lights on and off. He's extremely well behaved, Becky says, adding she's never heard him bark.

Benton is a working dog for Steven Jr.'s specific needs and not a family pet, she emphasizes, and CCI makes that clear. When Benton's vest is on, he is working and Steven Jr.'s sisters are not allowed to interact with him. He can be "released" from work at times, which allows for some relaxation of the rules, but it's often tough for the girls to take.





K9 Officer Jagger and his human partner, Officer Jacob Carlile.

Yet in any close working relationship, bonds form that go beyond the tasks at hand. Benton is part of the family. "I feel he's been a huge blessing," Becky says.

"He's the best dog in the world and we love him," Steven Jr. says.

## THE NATURAL

Indiana's natural resources are a scent bonanza for dogs. The Indiana Department of Natural Resources

Division of Law Enforcement K9s, of course, know this; they've been trained what to sniff out and what the reward will be.

**Jagger**, partnered with Officer Jake Carlile in LaGrange County, has different collars, harnesses and rewards for every task. The 6-year-old Lab mix (or "Lab and stuff," as Carlile says) could be tracking a suspect, a lost person, poached wildlife, ginseng or a weapon.

On a sunny day, Carlile has a visitor throw a shell casing out into

a wide grassy area. Then he brings Jagger out from the back of his DNR truck, snaps the evidence-finding collar on and lets him off the lead. "Find," he says.

Jagger quickly locates the casing and alerts his partner. For this job, the reward is a tennis ball thrown by Carlile. The dog flies into the field to retrieve it, then brings it to the visitor. She throws it—badly—but he chases it with no less joy.

Jagger is one of two resource protection dogs in northeast Indiana;



the other team is Officer Levi Knach and K9 **Kenobi** in Whitley County. Jagger came to the DNR by way of a South Dakota animal shelter. The DNR's dogs come from shelters or are donated, Carlile says.

Carlile and Jagger have worked together since going through the DNR's K9 training program in 2016.

When job changes occur and an officer is paired with a new dog, however experienced both may be, they train again together.

"It's a team thing," Carlile says. "A lot of it is knowing your dog and your dog knowing you." Living and working with Jagger, Carlile recognizes his dog's watching-a-

squirrel look. He can tell whether Jagger is alerting him to evidence or just checking out another dog's scent.

Other states are training dogs to detect invasive plants and animals. That hasn't happened here, but that doesn't mean it couldn't. It depends more on limits of human time and resources than on the dogs' limitations,

Three generations: 4-month-old Saylor; her grandmother, 13 1/2-year-old Sydney; and her father, 7-year-old Four.





Carlile says: “Dogs’ abilities are really untapped in a lot of ways.”

## COMFORT AND CARE

In a ceremony attended by colleagues from all over the region, **Jared** was commissioned for his first

job, an important new ministry of Holy Cross Lutheran Church. Less than an hour later, he was deployed to Dayton, Ohio, after a mass shooting there the night before.

The fact that Jared was a 2-year-old golden retriever mattered not. Except, of course, that dogs are exceptionally gifted with the ability to sense and respond to hidden hurts, and to brighten lives.

Jared is part of the Lutheran Church Charities Comfort Dog ministry. This national program trains and sends purebred golden retrievers, their handlers and ministry partners into a variety of settings to offer comfort, and perhaps conversation and prayer. Hospitals, nursing homes, schools, funerals and crises such as the one in Dayton are just a few examples. In addition to Jared’s “Please Pet Me” Comfort Dog vest, he has another for the LCC Kare-9 military ministry. He knows how he’s supposed to behave when the vest is on, and that he can be a playful young dog when it’s off.

Home base is Holy Cross Lutheran Church and School and Concordia High School. His team members—nine handlers and 13 ministry partners—are all connected with the church and/or schools. Handlers, trained at the LCC’s Northbrook, Illinois headquarters, share Jared’s care. Ministry partners go out with handlers to provide crowd control but also to talk and pray with people.

One of Jared’s handlers, Concordia teacher Pam Rusher, brings him to school one day a week for student visits. “Some students stay for seconds, some for minutes,” she says. One young man who’d just lost his grandmother sat next to Jared for several minutes, petted him and said little. Jared had been at the funeral, too.

“I think we’ve all had moments with Jared when we’re just amazed at the way he picks up on things,” says Sandy Shavlik, the Top Dog (the LCC’s term, not hers, she says) on Jared’s team. “He just has a sense.”

“Sometimes he puts his head on somebody’s knee,” Rusher adds. “He’s a sweet soul.”

When COVID-19 closed schools and canceled gatherings last spring, Jared continued his once-a-week visits via Concordia’s virtual classes. The team looks forward to resuming in-person pets and hugs in the fall.

After all, Jared’s Scripture—each LCC Comfort Dog has one—is Psalm 100:5, which talks about God’s steadfast love.

“Our goal is to bring the love of Christ to people,” Shavlik says. “Jared is our bridge to get there.”

## SEEN AND HERD

The border collie, **Four** (fourth in his litter, and the name stuck), moves around the pasture, eyes on a knot of 20 Katahdin cross sheep. His ears are trained—mostly—on the commands of owner Carol Michel: “Walk up... down... walk up... down... stay.”

His gaze and stance, not nipping or nudging, put pressure on the sheep to go where he wants. If Four is moving too fast, a “down” momentarily takes the pressure off.

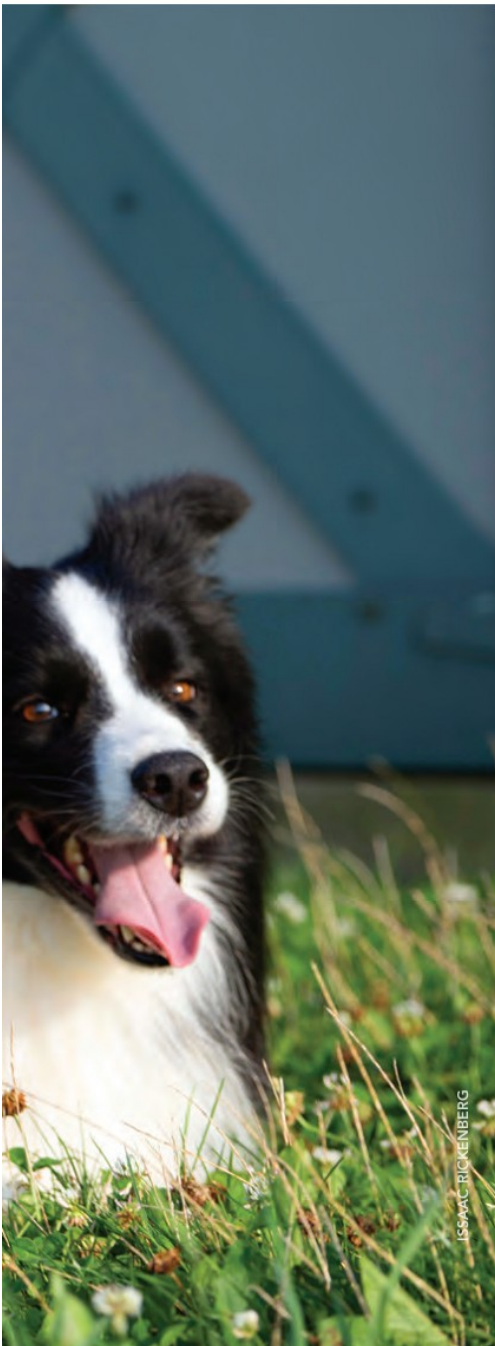
“And reminds him this isn’t a rodeo,” Michel adds wryly.

It’s a dance choreographed with each task on the farm near Huntington, which Michel owns with husband Ed. Each sheep is eventually taken to market, and the ground mutton feeds the dogs. The farm also includes seven call ducks and an agility course in the front yard.

Four, now 7, and his mother, 13 ½-year-old **Sydney**, are trained and titled herding dogs. Michel and others in her border collie circle work and breed within a trusted network.

“We don’t hold with breeding dogs just to sell them, and we don’t breed border collies to sell them to people who can’t handle them,” she says. “If somebody wants to sell you a border collie and hasn’t asked you 40 questions and done a background check, run,” she advises. Michel estimates she screened 100 people to sell four puppies.

Border collies are smart and engaging; Sydney knows how to work



ISSAAC RICKENBERG





Conall alerting on a buried victim.

a room. But “If you don’t give them things to do, they will create their own,” Michel says.

The dogs move the sheep out of Michel’s space during feeding and when she opens and closes the wide metal gates. Though sheep aren’t aggressive, “when one goes, they all go, and if you don’t get out of the way in time, you’re going to get run over.”

Sometimes Four gets so engrossed in his task that he forgets to listen. That’s when Michel tosses an orange-tipped section of old garden hose in front of him—never at him—to get his attention.

And the dance goes on.

## TO FIND THE LIVING

If you’re lost, Conall can find you. But don’t bother to thank him. All he wants is the tug toy held by his handler, Bill Johnston.

Johnston and Conall, a 7-year-old German shepherd, are part of the Indiana Search and Response Team, an all-volunteer organization trained to find the missing, the injured and the deceased.

“When you don’t know where the person is, you just try to work the area based on which way the wind is blowing,” says Johnston, a retired carpenter and contractor. It’s amazing how far away dogs can pick up the scent, he adds. When Conall’s head pops up and he goes from sweeping back and forth to a straight run, Johnston knows he’s found someone. “He’ll bark until I get there.”

Even when there’s nothing to be found, Conall gets the tug toy for completing the job.

Search work is demanding. So are the twice-a-week regular training sessions, specialized training, FEMA course work and other requirements for certification and recertification. The expenses add up, and the

nonprofit ISART relies on donations.

Once Johnston began doing agility and then ISART work with his German shepherds, though, there was no turning back. He built a training center on his rural Huntertown property.

From the moment Johnston releases him from the kennel and brings him onto the agility course at the center, Conall is all about getting that tug toy. Conall, eyes trained on Johnston, follows each command through the obstacles, occasionally barking or whining.

The dog isn’t crazy, Johnston says. “He is probably the highest-drive German shepherd you will ever run into.”

Indeed, when the exercise is done and Johnston plays tug-of-war with him, all is well in Conall’s world.

Conall drops the toy at a visitor’s feet and looks at her. When she picks it up and tugs it with him, his focused eyes begin to sparkle. 