

An Officer's Best Friend: Getting to Know Kodiak's K-9 Team

Wednesday, 17 July 2013

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Officer Mike Barnett stands with Max the police dog and their K-9 Patrol Unit. The two have been working together for almost seven years. Brianna Gibbs/KMXT photo

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Seven years ago, Kodiak Police Officer Mike Barnett embarked on a life-changing endeavor when he applied for and was reassigned to be Kodiak's lone K-9 officer. Since then, Barnett and his four-legged companion, Max, have become inseparable, and played a key role in many of the department's searches and arrests. KMXT's Brianna Gibbs recently caught up with Barnett and learned more about his canine partnership.

Mike Barnett and Max aren't a typical law enforcement duo. As partners, they work very closely together, but there is one big difference between the two of them — Max is a dog.

At 10-years-old, Max is the third police dog in the history of the Kodiak Police Department. He has been on active duty for almost seven years. Brianna Gibbs/KMXT photo

But more than that, Max is a police dog, which Barnett says is important to note.

“He’ll never be a pet. He’ll always be a working dog, because he is with me 24 hours a day. He lives here. I actually see more of this dog than I see of my own family. I’ve got to be aware of him 24 hours a day. It’s like a loaded hand gun sitting around. I’m responsible for everything he does.”

The unique police partnership began about seven years ago when Barnett travelled to Alabama and met Max for the first time. Barnett said Max was born somewhere in Europe, and was trained in one of the many European Sport Dog Trial Associations. Max’s training was done in Holland, which is why Barnett uses Dutch commands.

“So Max is ten years old, he’s a Belgian Malamar, for the most part. He is a dual purpose police service dog. Which means he does the scent detection, or drugs, and patrol, or bite work. The bite work is kind of what they train in the Sport Dog Trial Association. So when I went down to Huntsville, Alabama, they say who are you, where are you coming from, what kind of agency is he going back to, and they try to match you with an appropriate dog. And that’s how I met Max.”

While Max is trained to bite, Barnett said he hasn’t had to bite anyone on duty in his entire seven years on Kodiak. He still trains regularly for it, and Barnett thanks Officer Jeff Houlden for suiting up and playing the unfortunate role of culprit to help Max hone his skills.

However, more often than not Barnett said Max is used for scent detection on searches or drug-related cases.

“He’s been connected with, largely responsible for, drug seizures into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. My estimate would be around a million dollars at this point, of drugs that we have been involved with taking off the street and saying well that’s this much worth this much street value. Looking at it

that way.”

Max lives with Barnett and his family, and typically isn't given work commands while there. Barnett said they try to make him as much of a family member as possible, while keeping in mind that he's still a working dog. Barnett's wife, Martha, said living with Max has been wonderfully interesting over the years.

“He is high maintenance. Ya, he's definitely not a pet. But he's a sweetheart. He's just the best police dog he could have asked for. He's just the best dog, he was really good with our kids when they were growing up, he gets along with our other dog really well.”

And if you ask Mike Barnett, Max is the perfect partner.

“Not to take, detract anything from my human partners, but I go to work daily with someone that's always ready to work, tail wagging, never speaks back, always does his job, always trying 110 percent. I feel very lucky. It has set me apart due to our hours, our scheduling; we work weird schedules, call outs. It's more of a life than it is a job.”

While Barnett is the partner and caretaker of Max, he's quick to credit the entire police force for the pair's success.

At 10-years-old, Max has started pulling back from some of the patrol stuff, but Barnett said overall he's still very capable.

Even when retirement does come, Max will still always be a working dog.

“I can never just throw the switch and say, OK, we don't do that anymore. Same thing when you retire him, he'll never be, like you were saying a pet, he'll never be a normal dog. But he's such a good dog.”

But for now, Max is still a police dog, and he and Mike will continue their police partnership.

“It's just the coolest job in the world. It truly is. To see them, to be with them, to train him, to see the results, yes, I don't see how you could ever do it and not take away an appreciation for it. They truly are, they're unsung heroes. They can't speak for themselves. He doesn't get a paycheck. He's fed well, he's taken care of but it's all, he gets his award from me, and we try pretty hard to do that.”

