

Saratoga woman and her dog, Sweep, are there when they're needed

By Marianne L. Hamilton
for the Saratoga News

Posted: 03/24/2009 05:41:56 PM PDT
The World Trade Center. The Columbia Space Shuttle disaster. The terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City.

To the rest of the country, these places and events conjure up unspeakable horrors. Lynne Engelbert views them through another filter — that of hope, pride and gratitude.

Idly scratching the head of Sweep, her border collie, Engelbert recounts her 20 years as a canine search specialist. The Saratoga resident and her dog are among an elite squad that is regularly called upon by such agencies as the California Office of Emergency Services and FEMA. Engelbert's job: to enter collapsed buildings during disasters, and — with Sweep's help — locate those who are trapped in the rubble. She also assists

Engelbert says her unusual career choice was almost pre-ordained: "I say only jokingly that I was raised by border collies. My dad had one that would work with him all day, and then play with us at night. That dog kept us in line, and if we were doing something wrong, she would let us know."

Those early years on the farm taught Engelbert the value of hard work and instilled in her the notion that there was no such thing as a "man's job." During her career she has raced dragsters, while doing mechanical maintenance on the cars herself. She has done the traditional as well, marrying and having two children — Shanti, 37, and Samir, 33. Her husband, David, died in 2006.

Even as she was raising her children, Engelbert still hankered for the rush of adrenaline she had experienced on the racetrack. She became part of NASA's team of rescue specialists, venturing into buildings to locate the trapped. But as the years wore on, the physical demands of the job took their toll. "As a rescue specialist, you're one of the first people in after a disaster," Engelbert explains. "I got too old to drag a jackhammer through a small space. But I still wanted to be on the front lines."

Engelbert happened to watch a demonstration of the talents of "sniffer dogs" performed by Shirley Hammond. After the cataclysmic earthquake in Mexico City in 1985, Hammond (a retired RN and member of the Urban Search and Rescue team) had championed the notion of sending dogs in to locate those caught in demolished buildings. She and her husband David, a structural engineer, subsequently were instrumental in petitioning Congress to pass the legislation that resulted in the establishment of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Hammond has since written the book considered the "bible" by rescue dog handlers, Training The Disaster Search Dog). Says Hammond, "From my experience in Mexico City and with US&R, I was very

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in training detection dogs for the Coast Guard, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office and Fire Department.

As one of three daughters of an Oregon farmer,

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involved with establishing the criteria and standards for doing rescues with dogs. I gave a presentation in San Francisco, and Lynne was in the audience."

As soon as Engelbert saw Hammond's rescue dog demo, she was hooked. She hung around with Hammond and other rescuers for two years, while earning a degree in fire science technology. Two years later she acquired the first of four dogs she has trained for rescue work. "I've been doing this ever since," she says.

Rescue dog handlers like Engelbert now play a crucial role in the disaster recovery process. Once structural and HAZMAT specialists have determined that a building is safe enough for rescuers to enter, Engelbert and Sweep and their colleagues are allowed in. The highly trained canines typically find victims in short order.

"Our dogs can determine very quickly if there's someone alive in the building, just using their noses," says Engelbert, a member of California Urban Search and Rescue Task Force 3. "They're taught to find a live human scent, so they'll stand there and bark at the scent source until we can visually or physically mark it. Then we turn it over to the rescue specialists to pull the person out."

When not working on "live finds," Engelbert serves on the board of the Canine Specialized Search Team, and is an associate with the Institute for Canine Forensics, which takes the lead on historical remains detection (i.e., so-called "cold cases"). In 1999, Engelbert was deployed to the Milpitas landfill, where she and her dog Lucy (now deceased) helped locate the body of a San Jose woman who had been missing for more than two weeks. "It's absolutely amazing what these dogs can find," says Engelbert. "They can go in and detect burials that are hundreds, or even thousands of years old. We humans never lose our smell."

Engelbert admits that her husband was never entirely comfortable with the idea of her traveling across the country to work major disasters with mostly male crewmembers. But to her, it was just business as usual.

"I grew up on the farm and I have an engineering background; I've always been in a more male-oriented environment," Engelbert says. "Still, it was hard for my husband when I'd go out on a deployment. When I went to Oklahoma City and the World Trade Center, it absolutely freaked him out."

It's not difficult to understand his anxiety: Though Engelbert usually ventures into structures to find victims who may still be alive, the World Trade Center assignment was grim in the extreme.

"By the time any of the task forces got there, there really weren't any live people to be found," she reveals. "It was more bits and pieces than a large source of scent for the dogs. But we did locate one body, which belonged to one of the firefighters." Once Engelbert's dog picked up the scent of the fallen man, it took four hours for rescue teams to extricate his body from the ruins. "It gave everyone goose-bumps to find one of their own," Engelbert says. "To be able to give him to his family to take home was really an amazing feeling."

Faced with such tragedies, how is it possible for Engelbert to keep her sanity on the job? "I know it's a very odd thing to say that I love my work," she muses, "but I do. For example, on the shuttle recovery mission, I — along with the thousands of others who were there — helped bring all seven astronauts home. To be able to do that, to bring closure to the families, is truly a gift. It's a blessing that I get back."

Surprisingly, such blessings are often the sole compensation that Engelbert and her fellow rescue

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dog specialists receive. "The only time I get paid to do what I do is if I go out on a national deployment that FEMA puts on; then we're paid well," she says. During those assignments, the task forces are on call 24/7. If they're lucky, they can squeeze in a few hours of sleep. But even so, they must be ready to spring into action should the situation dictate.

Such was the case when Hurricanes Ike and Gustav slammed ashore last year. Engelbert was among the rescue teams on standby in Atlanta and Montgomery. "The storms headed into Texas, so we didn't get to engage," she says. "But FEMA was very active; there were seven task forces in Texas, waiting for deployment."

Engelbert was also part of the response effort after Hurricane Katrina, working as an emergency manager at the NASA Ames Research Center at Moffett Field. In that capacity she provided aid to teams at the Stennis Space Center in Mississippi and the Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans. "They had no power or water, and were isolated from the surrounding area," Engelbert says. "My primary job was to help support the needs of everyone at the centers, and the rescue teams. I was very busy."

These days, Engelbert stays just as busy — and ready to report for duty at a moment's notice — by keeping both herself and Sweep in top physical condition. The latter requires a significant amount of focus: She takes the collie to training sites in Menlo Park and Brisbane, hiding live human "scent sources" at various locales for the canine to discover.

"It's really difficult for us to find ideal training sites. We need piles of concrete, green waste to simulate what's left after a tornado or a hurricane, woodpiles, construction waste. If you look at the pictures taken after Katrina, most homes were demolished to nothing but sticks. Rescue dogs need realistic

situations. As you train, so shall you perform," Engelbert advises.

For a time, NASA made a portion of its property available for such maneuvers. But due to the current economic crisis, NASA has tightened its belt. "They've decided that if we can't pay, they're no longer going to allow our teams to train there," Engelbert says ruefully. "Losing this site has been devastating."

In her dreams, Engelbert envisions connecting with a charitable soul who will contribute a chunk of property to the cause. She serves as the West Coast director of Search and Rescue Assist, a registered nonprofit dedicated to the training and support of rescue dogs. The organization is based in Maryland, where a generous resident reportedly has answered SARA's call for an East Coast training facility. "There's a guy there who owns a quarry who's given us the use of part of the property; it has a huge wood pallet pile, a concrete pile and a grassy area for obedience and agility training," says Engelbert. "I'd love to see someone help us do something similar here."

Failing such an arrangement, Engelbert says she and her fellow rescue dog handlers would be thrilled to learn when buildings in the area are about to be demolished. "I tell people, 'Let us play in your junky old place.' Someone can knock a building down on Friday, we can train in the rubble on Saturday and Sunday, and then they can start cleaning and grinding on Monday. If I see a demolished building, I'm like a kid in a candy store."

Even without ideal training capabilities, Engelbert remains committed to assisting with rescues. She's delighted that her son Samir is becoming a rescue dog specialist (Shanti is a commander in the U.S. Navy). And she gives praise to the four-legged friends who've been by her side for the past two

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decades.

"Whenever you see a disaster, everyone talks about the 'sniffer dogs,'" Engelbert says. "I always say, 'If you can't find them, you can't rescue them.' Our dogs can — and do — find them very quickly."

More information about rescue dogs can be found at the Institute for Canine Forensics website, k9forensic.org/. Those interested in making their property available for rescue dog training may contact Lynne Engelbert at (408) 981-7831.

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