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unleash the hounds

SEARCH-AND-RESCUE DOGS
AND THE VOLUNTEERS WHO TRAIN THEM
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PHOTOS

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PHOTOS BY RANDEE DADDONA

Long Island Search and Rescue

INFO 631-398-5343, longislandsearchandrescue.org

Searching — for real

When it comes to search and rescue, happy endings can be rare.

In November, the group was called to a suburb of Syracuse to help look for Jenni-Lyn Watson, missing and feared the victim of foul play by her boyfriend.

“There’s a bit of adrenaline going when you’re looking for someone who may possibly not be alive,” says Hajek, who spent a day on that assignment, to no avail. Watson’s body was ultimately discovered in a park.

Closer to home, one of the group’s human-remains dogs — which search for cadavers — helped locate the body of a man who drowned in Mattituck’s Laurel Lake in October 2009 after his canoe capsized.

“It’s hard to deal with in the beginning,” says Padden, who was on that assignment with his dog Kodiak. “You couldn’t save him, but you could give closure to the family. They can have their last goodbyes.”

About the group

Long Island Search and Rescue was established in 2006 and got nonprofit status this year. About 20 people are active in the group, which has six dogs certified to respond to emergencies and six others working toward certification.

Members have different reasons for joining. “I see a burning building and I want to run in, not out,” says Padden, who has worked as a volunteer firefighter. He’s working toward master’s degrees in homeland security and emergency management.

Sandra Happes, 31, of Port Jefferson, saw a posting on craigslist.org for volunteers to hide so the dogs can practice finding them. “They show you what to do,” says Happes, who works in medical sales. Dillon Clark, 22, of Dix Hills, joined because he’s been trained as an emergency medical technician and thought working as a medic would be “something different” to do while attending college.

The group trains, no matter what the weather. Says Padden, “The majority of people don’t get lost when it’s nice out.”

See a video
of the LI Search and
Rescue team practicing



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a nose for trouble



Rescue dogs sniff out clues in an effort to save lives

BY BETH WHITEHOUSE
beth.whitehouse@newsday.com

“You wanna work? You wanna work?” Heidi Hajek asks in a high-pitched voice, psyching up her bloodhound Bella.

“Check it,” Hajek commands, presenting a sweatshirt. The dog sniffs quickly. “Go find!” Hajek says.

Bella takes off, loping through the woods behind the Hagerman Fire Department in Patchogue, searching for the human whose smell was on the shirt — someone who (presumably) is stranded or lost.

Hajek runs, too, holding the lead line as Bella speeds through the trees, crumpling the underbrush, galloping past box turtles and over tick-infested grass — seeking, seeking, seeking. Bella is training for the day this scenar-

io might be real, when an Alzheimer’s patient wanders from a nursing home, when a hiker is hurt in the mountains upstate. That’s when the all-volunteer Long Island Search and Rescue K-9 Unit could be called in.

Bella is no Lassie. She doesn’t know her quest could be life or death; she’s not searching for the altruistic reward of helping someone in trouble. To Bella, and other rescue dogs like her, it’s a game. Good thing there’s a

prize. When Bella finds the person she’s looking for, she’ll get to play with a floppy, stuffed Santa Claus she’s allowed to have only when her job is done.

“That’s her paycheck,” says Hajek, 34, of West Babylon.

Mock disasters

Long Island Search and Rescue is a group of volunteers, some who own dogs and some who don’t, who want to help in a crisis. The group practices Sundays, preparing for the four to five times a year they get called, says team leader Chris Padden, 38, of Medford.

Long Island’s county police forces have their own K-9 units that operate at sensitive crime scenes such as the recent search for murder victims at Gilgo Beach. Instead, calls come from

Keli, who searches for human remains, seeks instruction from team leader Chris Padden. **ON THE COVER** Baxter the bloodhound, a team member.

fire departments, emergency-management services or smaller police departments, Padden says. The group has trained with the New York State Forest Rangers to help find missing hunters or hikers in areas such as the Adirondacks, says Bill Fonda, a local Department of Environmental Conservation spokesman. The group recently trained with the Civil Air Patrol, simulating a crash in Wading River in which a debris field needed to be scanned for six victims.



Team manager Heidi Hajek with her bloodhound Bella