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# Dogs seek out rescue opportunities

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Most days, 4-year-old Shandi is your average, playful German shepherd.

"If you know dogs and know how to handle a dog, all she's going to do is play with you," said her owner, Patrick Cheatham of Greenville. "She's just that type of dog."

But when Cheatham pulls out Shandi's crate and her special orange vest, she transforms in an instant. Suddenly alert, Shandi's eager to begin a hero's work.

Shandi is a search and rescue dog, a member of the South Carolina Search and Rescue Dog Association, a nonprofit organization dedicated to finding lost and missing people using specially trained canines.

**Advertisement**      The all-volunteer group has approximately 10 members across the state, according to the group's secretary, Maria Horn of Spartanburg.

"Search and Rescue Dogs is new in South Carolina," she said. "We're still trying to get the word out about our team. We work either when an emergency agency or law enforcement calls us out. We don't deploy if families call us. It has to be somebody official."

The group's dogs and their handlers have been involved in many publicized searches, Horn said. A search and rescue dog named Gandalf from the South Carolina group was credited in March with finding Michael Auberry, a Greensboro, N.C., Boy Scout missing for days in the North Carolina mountains.

Horn said the dogs are certified in four areas of search and rescue: trailing, air scent, land cadaver and water cadaver.

Shandi is an off-leash trailing and air scent dog, Cheatham said.

"A trailing dog is different than a tracking dog in that they don't follow footstep to footstep," he said. "They follow the actual odor or skin cell that person has dropped."

Cheatham and Horn said dogs and their handlers train approximately 10 hours each week when they aren't on search and rescue missions. The organization has trained with and been certified through master trainers in the field, Horn said.

"You can't just turn your dog loose and say, 'OK, I'm following my dog,'" Cheatham said. "The handler and the dog have to train together. When you're certified, you're certified as a team. If that team is broken up, you're re-certified."

Horn, 21, said SCSRDA is not about dogs.

"It's about finding a lost person," she said. "We put three months into training the wannabe dog handler before we even let them bring their dog in for evaluation. If the dog has potential for a search dog, we'll work with them. Some dogs still wash out, even though they had potential."

Neither Horn nor Cheatham works in law enforcement. Horn is a nursing student at University of South Carolina Upstate, and Cheatham works for Michelin Tire Corp.

"A lot of people don't realize what it takes to be involved in search and rescue, but when they do, they slack off and don't stay involved," Horn said.

Lee Rummage of Greenville is new to the organization. He's been on a few search and rescue missions and is ready to start training his puppy, Grace, for a position on the team.

"A lot of the dogs I've worked with have been doing this a while," he said. "I haven't watched one go from puppy to working, so I know it'll be a lot of work, but it'll be worth it."

One thing all members agreed on was the reward of being on a team that helps find missing people.

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