

Humble Heroes Among Us – Black Diamond Search & Rescue Council

JOHN THEO JR. NOVEMBER 11, 2022



Garland Newton with K9 Dakoda on water recovery training at 4H camp, Appomattox Va. By Dorothy Fensterer.

Many readers may know Garland Newton and Dorothy Fensterer as pillars of Halifax County. Dorothy is one of the best chiropractors in Virginia, practicing at Degraw Chiropractic, and Garland helps run the local AutoZone. However, what many people don't realize is that this couple moonlights as superheroes...minus the capes. For 10 years, the two have volunteered with the K9 Search and Rescue teams of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM).

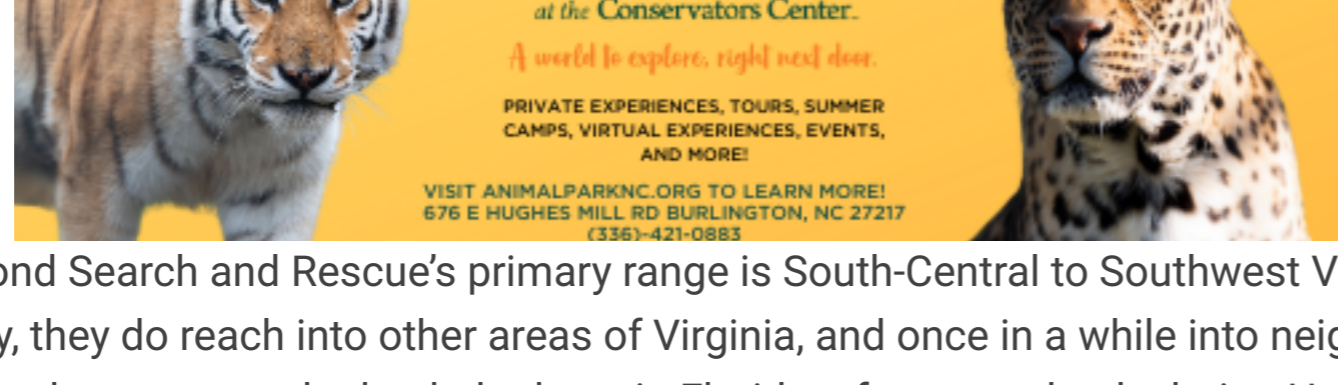
When someone goes missing and law enforcement runs a search that comes up empty, they sometimes reach out to VDEM for assistance. Depending on the situation, VDEM contacts local K9 teams who spring into action. The couple and their dogs (Fargo, Dakoda, Pepper, and Loki) are part of the Black Diamond Search and Rescue Council. Black Diamond is a group of K9 specialists who serve under VDEM and cover Southwest Virginia on a completely volunteer basis.



Dorothy Fensterer's and Garland Newton's K9's.
Back left to right: Loki- operational wilderness live find, Fargo- operational Human remains detection.
Front left to right: Dakoda in training for HRD, Pepper-retired from operational wilderness live find.
By Dorothy Fensterer

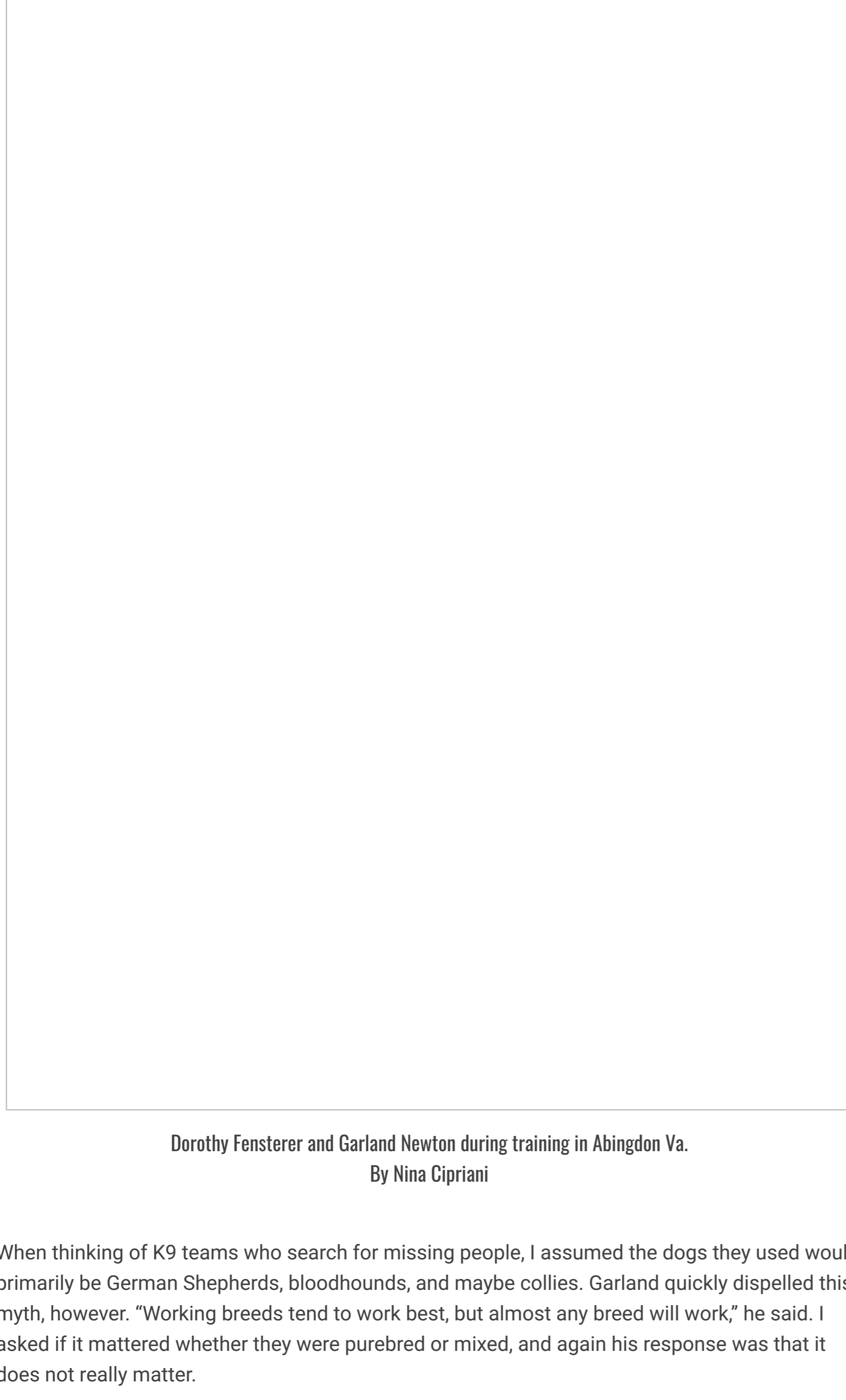
It doesn't matter where, when, or what the crisis is, these K9 specialists are trained to rescue people in any situation. From lost autistic children to elderly dementia patients, and from injured hikers to missing hunters. Fall, winter, spring, or summer. Rain, snowstorm, or heat wave. Man-made or natural disasters. Like special forces, they are highly trained with both gear and knowledge, and ready to deploy at a moment's notice.

The Black Diamond group consists of a dozen members who are 100 percent volunteer and train every week. In fact, when I interviewed Garland, he was preparing to head up to Appomattox to teach a water recovery course for an entire week where people from all over the world would be coming to train with their dogs.



Black Diamond Search and Rescue's primary range is South-Central to Southwest Virginia. Occasionally, they do reach into other areas of Virginia, and once in a while into neighboring states. Garland was even asked to help down in Florida a few years back, during Hurricane Michael. Besides K9 teams, VDEM also utilizes equine teams, tech rope teams, and cave teams for other emergency situations throughout the state.

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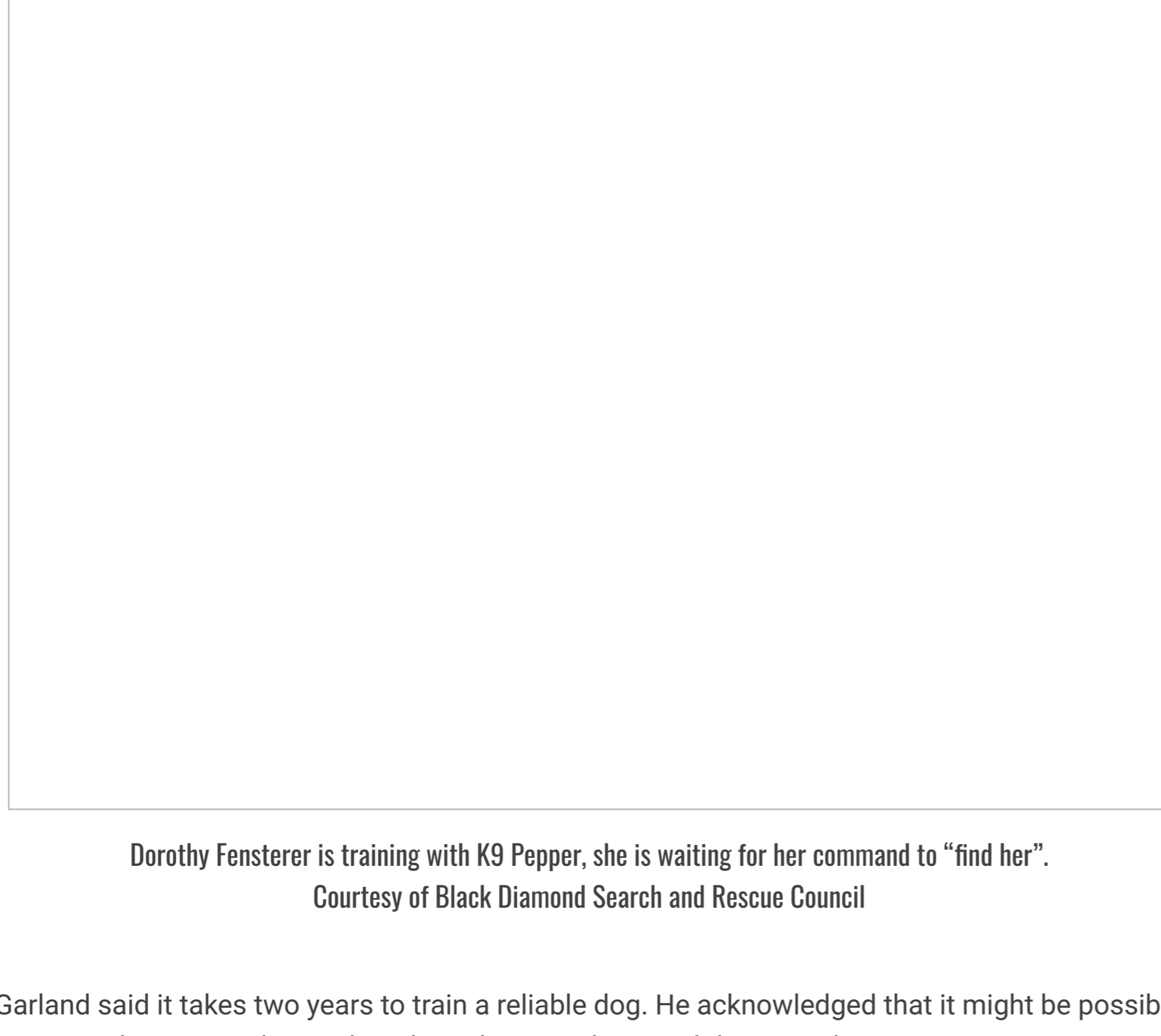
Dorothy Fensterer and Garland Newton during training in Abingdon Va.
By Nina Cipriani

When thinking of K9 teams who search for missing people, I assumed the dogs they used would primarily be German Shepherds, bloodhounds, and maybe collies. Garland quickly dispelled this myth, however. "Working breeds tend to work best, but almost any breed will work," he said. I asked if it mattered whether they were purebred or mixed, and again his response was that it does not really matter.

Garland prefers border collies as his partners, due to their high intelligence and small size. For pragmatic purposes, if either of his collies gets injured on the side of a mountain in a search and rescue mission, Garland can carry his partner out of the woods, whereas a 100-plus pound Labrador would need multiple people, or special equipment, to extract.

Garland and Dorothy's dogs are trained in different search and rescue areas. Garland's dogs (Fargo and Dakoda) specialize in HRD (Human Remains Detection) and water recovery, while Dorothy's dogs (Pepper and Loki) are trained "wilderness live find" for missing live individuals.

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Dorothy Fensterer is training with K9 Pepper, she is waiting for her command to "find her".
Courtesy of Black Diamond Search and Rescue Council

Garland said it takes two years to train a reliable dog. He acknowledged that it might be possible to train a dog sooner, but to do it the right way takes a solid 24 months.

When I asked Garland how he got into this obscure but amazing line of work, his response was fascinating. "I've wanted to do this since I was six or seven years old. However, there were not many groups back then who did this sort of thing," he said.

Time passed, and Garland married the woman of his dreams who was also a dog lover. One day, a little over a decade ago, Dorothy came home from a "Paws in the Park" event and handed her husband an information packet on introduction to K9 units, and the rest is history.

Garland could not share many search and rescue anecdotes due to the nature of the work. However, to give me an example of the dedication of the Black Diamond group, he did say that a few years back, several of his team members dropped everything on Christmas Eve and drove 200 miles to help with a search. It didn't go unnoticed that he would not talk about himself but constantly talked about his team, which speaks volumes about a person's character.

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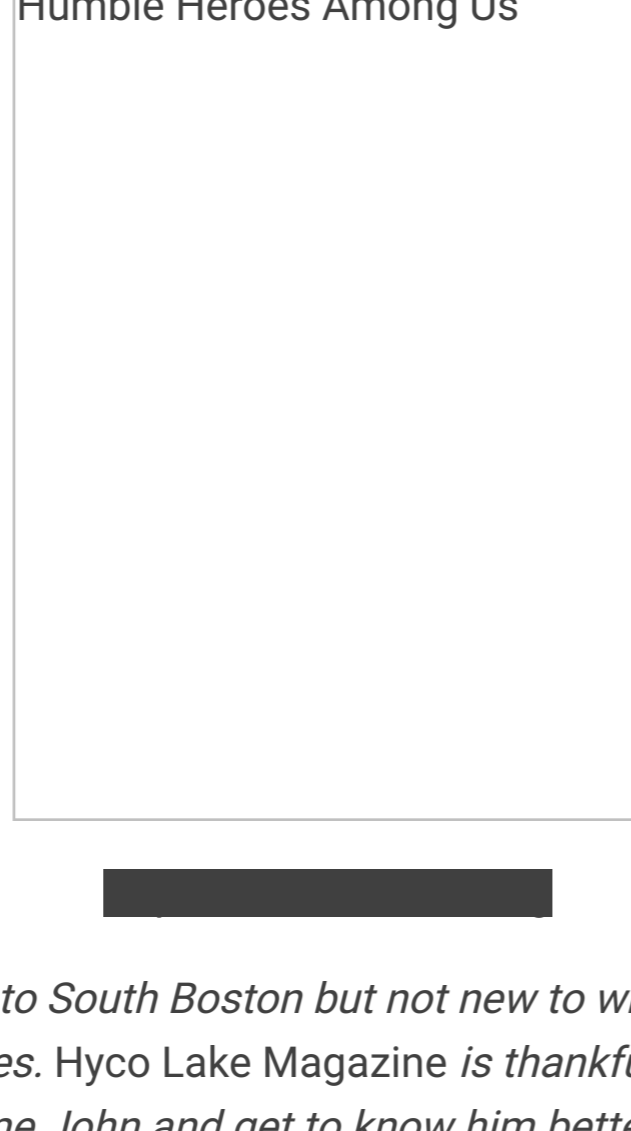


VDEM K9 strike team, working with Florida Task Force 3 at Mexico Beach after Hurricane Michael.
By Padraic Hughes

It is important to note that not a single taxpayer dollar goes to fund groups such as Black Diamond Search and Rescue Council. Everything is paid out of the individuals' pockets. They must train constantly to follow FEMA guidelines. Volunteers like Garland and Dorothy spend hundreds of hours a year and put thousands of miles on their vehicles traveling across Virginia. The additional cost of dogs, gear, and constant training are all on their dime. It truly is a labor of love and an absolute blessing to our state.

If you would like to donate to The Black Diamond Search and Rescue Council (501c3), which serves Halifax County, or find out more information about joining their K9 search and rescue team, the website is below.

Humble Heroes Among Us



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John Theo Jr. is relatively new to South Boston but not new to writing. He has authored several books and penned many articles. Hyco Lake Magazine is thankful to share his perspective on our community. Please welcome John and get to know him better by visiting him at Cozy Cave Self Storage or going to [redacted] where all his books are sold.

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