More than man’s best friend
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Alexandria, MN 56308

Sharolyn Sievert and Tam Bukowski cruise across Lake Louise on a warm summer night with Sievert’s German shepherd, Ari. The waning afternoon sky bounces on the sky blue waves as the chatter of good friends fills the air.

This is the tranquil setting of a carefree summer evening until Sievert looks to Ari and says, “Get to work.” Ari wastes no time; he’s on alert. He analyzes every scent, holding out for the one he wants: human. Ari directs the boat by using gestures until the crew zeroes in on their target. Then, Ari signifies to Sievert he has precisely located the scent. Sure enough, this spot is where Sievert and Bukowski had dropped the donated hip bone. Although this is only a training session, Ari has utilized these skills on numerous occasions when the origin of the scent is a missing friend or relative.

Sievert and Ari are members of the Central Lakes Search and Rescue (CLSAR) unit in Garfield. Sharolyn has had Ari for almost 10 years. She has also had another German shepherd, Jael, for more than three years. Another dog, Gus, used to be a member of Sharolyn’s family, until he passed away in 2011. “Losing my search dog was like losing part of my life,” Sievert lamented.

CLSAR is comprised of seven volunteers, including Sievert, who serves as president, and seven dogs, including Ari. Bukowski is not certified with any dogs and has never been on a mission, but still gladly volunteers many hours to this cause. Her contributions include driving the boat and even hiding in piles of debris in order to help train the dogs. Another helping hand
is Sharolyn’s mother, Sherry. “I fill in the slots,” Sherry said humbly. Sharolyn proceeded to rattle off countless duties Sherry has willingly done.

CLSAR’s dogs are trained in multiple disciplines, including area searches, cadavers and tracking and trailing in order to increase chances of finding missing persons. The various disciplines can be put to use on missions. The unit deploys on an average of 15 missions each year, and only goes once called by a law enforcement center. Although very fulfilling, CLSAR is not always easy to fit into schedules. Since CLSAR doesn’t charge for their services and volunteers are seldom reimbursed for expenses, most volunteers have full-time jobs outside of their SAR duties. This results in using vacation time, weekends and even taking time unpaid to assist law enforcement centers in search missions. Although most missions last merely a day or two, some have demanded longer stretches of time. One CLSAR volunteer spent a total of 13 days on a mission. He gave up the time to try to find someone he never knew. Sievert was prompted to join CLSAR after reading an article in the Echo Press regarding CLSAR in 2003. A friend told her she “had to do it.” “I would not be in search and rescue if it weren’t for this [article],” said Sievert. Being in SAR even inspired Sievert to write a book entitled K-9 Search: One Handler’s Journey. Though fictional, the story depicts many nonfiction events Sievert has encountered.

To maintain and sharpen skills for these events, the unit meets as a whole at a central location every Sunday. This involves members driving an average of two hours each. “For us, it’s pretty impressive because we all live so far apart,” Sievert said. Members also spend occasional weeknights training individually. Although the volunteers do the driving, the dogs’ dedication matches that of the volunteers. “He’ll work until he drops,” Sievert said of Ari. “He wants to be right.”

CLSAR recognizes that an important part of saving someone is preventing their absence in the first place. This is why CLSAR is so passionate about speaking with groups about “staying found” and demonstrating what their dogs are capable of. “We just love doing demos for kids,” said Sievert. During the summer, members of CLSAR travel to Lake Beauty Bible Camp once a week to speak to kids about staying safe and then proceed with a demonstration.

Another event CLSAR plans to host is the Minnesota North American Police Work Dog Association (NAPWDA) SAR Workshop in September. NAPWDA is renowned for its high level of training and certification standards, and is offering its services for the workshop at no cost. All NAPWDA has asked is that attendees pay for their food, lodging and transportation. CLSAR hosted a similar workshop last year, and participants were very pleased. “Excellent training opportunity with some of the most purposeful terrain used. All the instructors were well-rounded and knowledgeable with open minds to different styles or approaches to tracking/trailing,” said Tony Kotschevar, deputy for the Stearns County Sheriff’s Office. “We realized it’s difficult for some people to pay their own way,” said Sievert. “So, this year, we decided to apply for a bunch of grants.” Thus far, CLSAR has received grants and donations totaling approximately $6,000, $1,000 awarded by Planet Dog Foundation. This money will go toward food and lodging for those attending, in order to accommodate more participants.

For only $335, a team can attend the workshop, stay at the campsite and have all meals provided. The workshop will be held September 24-28 at Camp Ripley in Little Falls. Sievert foresees CLSAR continuing its services for years to come. Conversations regarding the future only include questions about how to improve upon what they already have.
The only pride Sievert shows is for her fellow volunteers and her dogs. She boasts that CLSAR is comprised of “unpaid professionals” who are very diligent in their duties. This, she says, is how CLSAR receives so much publicity.

But at the end of the day, Sievert knows it’s still about the dogs. “These guys are the heroes; not us.”