

# Building a Wreck

## Search dog group breaks ground on 125-acre center

By Marlize Van Romburgh (Staff Writer)

The Search Dog Foundation has broken ground on a \$14.5 million National Training Center outside Santa Paula, where the nonprofit wants to train hundreds of the canine teams that find survivors trapped beneath the rubble of disasters. The Ojai-based foundation is the largest organization in the country to train dogs and supply them to fire departments and other emergency response organizations free of charge. Its new training facility, made possible by a 125-acre land donation by Ventura County's McGrath farming family, will be the first of its kind in the world – a place where hundreds of search dogs and their handlers will be readied for disaster deployment. “Where we see disaster – it could be a flood, it could be a hurricane, it could be a collapsed building under construction, it could



Search dog teams work in a mock rubble pile at the future home of the Search Dog Foundation's National Training Center in Santa Paula. Linda Tacconelli, left, is shown with her dog Joe on his leash as Eric Gray watches Riley work through the debris.



Firefighter Eric Gray of Santa Barbara with search dog Riley.

be a tornado on the East Coast or an earthquake here in California – that's where these dogs function,” Wilma Melville, the organization's founder, said on a recent tour of the property. The Search Dog Foundation is \$8 million into its \$14.5 million fundraising goal for the center. By Sept. 11, it hopes to have reached the \$10 million mark. The property, tucked away in a canyon off a rural road, is slated to open on Sept. 11, 2013. The 12-year anniversary of the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil is symbolic for the Search Dog Foundation because the World Trade Center site was the first time its dogs gained national media attention for sniffing out survivors beneath the rubble. In the years since, demand for

the specially trained dogs has grown. The waiting list for trained dogs is now years-long, said Debra Tosch, Search Dog Foundation's executive director. “Believe me, people will be waiting in line to come here,” she said. Her organization would eventually like to see more than 400 certified search dog teams in the U.S. – up from about 180 currently. The Ojai organization is currently training 21 teams at the site of the future national training center. Once complete, teams from across the country and around the world will be invited to train at the property at 6800 Wheeler Canyon Road. The facility, which will include a great house, kennel facility with room for 40 dogs, offices, vet clinic and training grounds,



is being built by Santa Maria-based Diani Building Corp. and was designed by Santa Barbara-based Kruger Bensen Ziemer Architects. The most crucial function of the property will include outdoor areas where collapsed buildings are simulated. Real humans will often be buried beneath the debris for the dogs to find. A “disaster dome,” built with the help of Hollywood set designers, will be able to simulate snow and extreme temperatures to familiarize the dogs with the range of weather conditions they may be asked to work in. Props will range from piles of concrete rubble to simulated mud slides.

The center will also serve as a testing site for federal and state emergency response agencies to prepare search dog teams for future deployment. Most recently, two Search Dog Foundation-trained teams were dispatched to Joplin, Mo., where a tornado devastated the area. The Ojai-based organization’s dogs and handlers were also deployed to Japan in the wake of the tsunami-earthquake disaster there. And in Haiti, following the 2010 earthquake that ruined the island nation, they found 12 people alive beneath the rubble – a record for a U.S. search team. But the most symbolic disaster date for the organization remains Sept. 11, 2001.

In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center, disaster dog search gained newfound prominence, Melville said, as people around the country realized that the canines can find people alive beneath the rubble. Dogs haven’t always played such an important role in disaster rescue. Fifteen years ago, sufficiently trained and certified dogs were hard to come by, as were the firefighters who knew how to work with them. Melville, a retired schoolteacher from New Jersey, decided that it was her life’s mission to change that. She founded the foundation in 1996, after returning from the wreckage of the Oklahoma City bombing. She and her search dog, Murphy, were on the scene at that disaster. “That was the trigger event for this organization,” she said. Upon her return to California, she

started to think about the sorry state of the U.S. emergency response system – particularly the lack of well-trained search dogs. At that time, civilians and handlers were training dogs individually – there was no national organization that would do so – and were usually paying for the training expenses out of their own pockets. Melville teamed

well trained he was,” said Linda Tacconelli, referring to canine partner Joe. At a demonstration at the Santa Paula facility, firefighter Eric Darling and his dog, Ben, showed off some of those skills. The dog, who views the training as one big, fun game of hide-and-seek, is barking, bouncing up and down and pulling at his leash, ready to show off



A rendering of the Search Dog Foundation’s National Training Center, slated to be built on 125 acres outside Santa Paula. The target completion date is Sept. 11, 2013.

up with a trainer and started the Ojai-based organization to supply fully-trained search dogs to fire departments at no cost to taxpayers. The dogs are typically found in animal shelters, where the boisterous energy that makes them perfect for search and rescue often means they’re abandoned by owners. “These are the dogs that decide to landscape your yard and rearrange your furniture,” Tosch said. After passing stringent screens and tests, the dogs are trained for six months before being teamed up with a handler, typically a firefighter or other first responder. The canines come to their handlers pre-trained and then the two train together with other dog-handler teams to ready for FEMA certification. “The one thing I took back from the deployment in Japan was, truly, how

his tricks. First, Darling has Ben run across a teeter-totter and through a tunnel. The dog then climbs a ladder, crawls across a wobbly plank several feet above the ground and makes his way back down a ladder on the other side, walking down head first. These exercises prepare dogs to traverse over unsteady ground, including piles of debris that may move beneath them, and into the upper floors of collapsed buildings. Tongue hanging out and tail wagging, Ben looks around for his next challenge. The biggest reward for these dogs is finding a “hidden” person in a tunnel or beneath debris, Tosch said. In training, that person usually has a toy or treat the dog can have when he makes a discovery. In real life, the reward for dog and handler is having found a human life among the wreckage.