

Aberdeen Canine Becomes a Certified Search Dog

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*During training in Salt Lake City, Taylor leaps while preparing to gain FEMA certification with her handler, Trevor Lawrence, in April.
(Photo courtesy of Fitzgerald Peterson, Utah Task Force)*

When Sandy was renamed Taylor, it symbolized her move from a cage in a shelter to the opportunity to become a nationwide hero, of being rescued to becoming a rescuer with the California-based National Disaster Search Dog Foundation.

Taylor, a yellow Lab, is a disaster search canine with Utah Task Force 1. On May 17, Taylor and her handler, firefighter/paramedic and Task Force 1 logistics specialist Trevor Lawrence with the Unified Fire Authority, received FEMA certification, which enables them to be deployed to aid in searches during nationwide disasters.

Along with two other handler teams from Utah, Taylor and Lawrence earned certification in five months. According to the SDF, the normal timeline is around a year.

“The dogs are amazing and the program is beyond amazing to not only pick these dogs but train them with a strong foundation,” Lawrence said.

Founded in 1996 by Wilma Melville, the SDF recruits canines from shelters across the country to be trained to locate victims trapped among wreckage following disasters.

Taylor’s journey in becoming a search dog started in Aberdeen, where she was known as Sandy.

She was born and adopted at the Sioux Falls Area Humane Society. Once her family could no longer care for her, Sandy was surrendered to the Aberdeen Area Humane Society toward the end of 2011, according to Aberdeen’s Humane Society manager, Stacey Franks, who described Sandy as a good, non-aggressive canine.

“She was really sweet — a quiet little dog,” Franks said. “She had a lot of puppy energy, so she liked to run around and play. She’s always going to be Sandy to me.”

Kellee Matthews, of the South Dakota Canine Center in Sturgis, recruited Sandy to begin training as a search dog. The family-run business is a Midwest recruiter for the SDF, and Matthews has been a volunteer for the program for over 12 years.

“We travel on monthly routes throughout the central states to scour shelters/rescues for these intense and highly driven dogs,” Matthews said in an email. “The dogs typically spend about two months with us going through thorough evaluations and medical clearances to be sure they are suited for this demanding work. Once we recommend them, they travel to the SDF National Training Center in Santa Paula, Calif., to complete training and are paired with first responders across the country.”

Taylor was given her new name by Mike Diani, the general contractor of SDF’s National Training Center, according to a biography from the SDF. Diani renamed her after his 17-year-old niece, who died in a battle with ovarian cancer.

In a statement included in Taylor’s biography, Diani said his niece “was always full of vigor and energy, and the epitome of strength and grace while fighting for her life.”

Lawrence got the chance to become a handler because another backed out, making room for him to step in and attend the two-week handler’s course, where each dog is partnered with a handler, in California in December 2013.

“It was kind of interesting,” Lawrence said. “I didn’t get to work with her until the first part of the second week, and we clicked right out of the gate.”

Since being paired with Taylor, Lawrence has made some life changes. “It’s like having a kid. I’m always packing for two,” said Lawrence, who explains that Taylor accompanies him everywhere, including work. Wherever she goes, her pleasing personality turns heads.

“She’s very good as far as just being a dog, but, when it’s time to work, she flips her switch and she gets busy,” Lawrence said. “Her drive turns on to overdrive.”

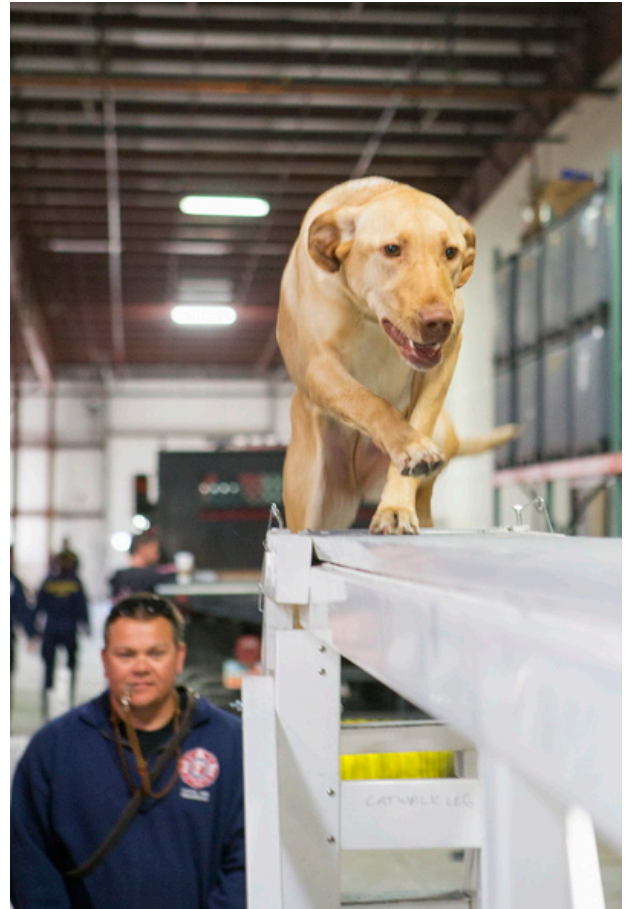
The team practices daily, waiting to put training into action.

“They put us on the right path we need to be on to succeed,” Lawrence said.

Learn more at www.SearchDogFoundation.org

Characteristics of a SDF search dog

- Bold, energetic and athletic.
- A strong prey/play drive.
- Well-socialized, personable and outgoing
- Sure-footed.
- Able to ignore loud or sudden noises.
- Of a hunting/herding breed.
- Excellent health.
- At least 8 months and no older than 2.5 years.



Taylor, a disaster search dog, with her handler Trevor Lawrence, of Utah Task Force 1, train together daily. In this photo taken in January in Salt Lake City, the pair prepare for FEMA certification, received on May 17.

(Photo courtesy of Fitzgerald Peterson, Utah Task Force)