

The Overlander



GETTING OUT THERE!



Practical tips on how to stay safe as they explore new destinations from a medical perspective. | PG 16

IN THIS ISSUE:



Six Years x 365 days in Hours and Minutes
A story of a trail opening and closing | PG 32



Change Your Socks
Team Rubicon on giving new meaning to an old military phrase | PG 44



Distancing or Not?
Have you ever stopped mid-trail, speechless? | PG 06

VESTED

INTEREST IN

K9s

by Todd Travers



Sandy Marcal
Founder, *Vested Interest in K9s*



I have spent my career in public safety, serving in both law enforcement and the fire service, so when I heard of the work that the Vested Interest in K9s organization provides; I knew I had to be a part of this exceptional group of people committed to serving our law enforcement and canine community.

I happened to hear about this organization while watching a local news piece on how their work was helping local K9 officers, so I reached out. Sandy Marcal, the founder of the organization, responded to my inquiry, and we spoke about my background as well as the work the organization performs. Needless to say, I quickly asked, “**what do you need me to do?**” After the volunteer administrative work was completed, I was on board helping agencies and officers from across the country obtain ballistic vests for their K9 partners.

Sandy started the organization in 2009; however, her work with animals goes back over twenty years, when she started volunteering to help police dogs obtain protective vests. Even before then, she had been organizing fundraisers in local communities for animal-related charities and hosting events to raise money for animal shelters. Over time, after speaking with local law

enforcement agencies to find out what their challenges were, she decided to focus mostly on K9s. Not surprisingly, budgetary constraints were at the top of the list. The ability to purchase much-needed equipment was an issue. Keep in mind that back in the early 2000’s ballistic vests for K9s were a luxury item, and not many agencies could afford the equipment; Sandy saw a need and moved forward with a plan.

Since 2009, the 501c (3) organization has grown tremendously from a local non-profit to a national organization. Sandy is the only full-time staff member, along with two part-time office support staff. There are over 80 volunteers from across the country, and as one of those volunteers, I can personally vouch for how extremely rewarding this work is. A number of volunteers help by reaching out to the departments and officers who have requested equipment or service from the organization. We coordinate with

them to ensure they have the information needed to submit the grant application for the vest, which, not unlike a vest for a human, are custom-fitted to the individual K9. The organization also has a vetting process for employees and volunteers to ensure that sensitive information from the officers and agencies remains secure and volunteers receive remote training for their specific responsibilities.

I have volunteered for this organization for the last five years, and I can only imagine the challenges that Sandy faced when starting. **She told me that the biggest challenge that she faced was realizing that she could not do all the work by herself, and she quickly realized she had to enlist the trusted help of others.**

According to Sandy, public support for the organization has been tremendous, and there are people that are willing to donate both money and sponsorship for a vest. If someone is interested in sponsoring a vest, they can have an embroidered



message on the breastplate of the vest as a memorial or message for the K9. Vests for humans are expensive, and so are vests for K9s. **A vest donation is \$960; however, the expense is worth it to protect our K9 partners.** Since starting the organization, Sandy says that public support has never waned, and the group has vested over 4,247 K9s from across the country and of all different breeds. Most people see police K9s as German Shepherds or Belgian Malinois; however, the group has vested other breeds such as Dutch Shepherds, Bloodhounds, Rottweilers, German Short Haired Pointers, Springer Spaniels, Pit Bulls, and Labrador Retrievers. Sandy's first



personally vested K9 was a Bloodhound named Edgar out of Dartmouth, Massachusetts.

On December 11, 2018, K9 Gabo of the Jonesboro, Arkansas police department was shot five times at close range in the line of duty. The

vest donated by Vested Interest in K9s, Inc. was credited with saving his life, and Gabo returned to full duty after two months. Sandy had the opportunity to meet K9 Gabo and his handler, Investigator Erik Johnson, about nine months after the incident. The emotional story was broadcast by Inside Edition and can be viewed below.

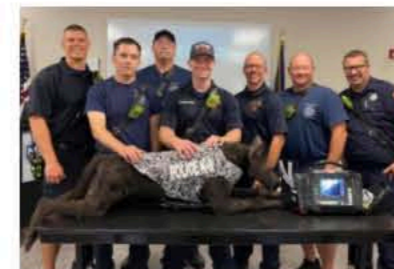
Not only does the organization provide vests to K9s, but with the opioid crisis still looming and the hazards that these narcotics pose to both officers and K9s, they have donated over 1,800 opioid reversal Narcan kits for K9s that have potentially been exposed to those hazards. Also, not unlike health

insurance for the K9's human partner, VIK9s implemented the "Healthcare for K9 Heroes" medical insurance program in 2016. To date, they have provided over \$178,000 in much-needed medical insurance premiums for K9s.

Police K9 units have specialized vehicles that can accompany their K9 partner. These vehicles have cooling systems, automatic openers, and specialized carriers to keep K9s safe while their partner is driving. Police vehicles in general, are expensive, and K9-equipped vehicles are even more so; Sandy saw another opportunity to help. **The organization has donated three Chevrolet Tahoe K9-equipped patrol vehicles to agencies with financial needs through a nationwide contest.** I can speak from experience that this giveaway was no easy feat, and I can wholeheartedly appreciate the work that Sandy put in to secure the grant to obtain these vehicles and provide them to these agencies. It was a lot of work to coordinate on several fronts, and after learning from experience from the first giveaway, the second two went somewhat easier. Community involvement skyrocketed and voting on the website logged over 360,000 public voters for the thirty selected finalists. The finalists were treated like celebrities when they were out in public. People would come up to them, shake their hands, and congratulate them on their finalist selection. And most importantly, thank them for their service. They were rallying community support on many different fronts. Some even had entire school systems voting for their local K9 to win the Tahoe. Sandy led the efforts and worked with each of the thirty officers on how to spread the word locally and nationally. Some of the officers appeared on donated billboards, made videos and created social media posts that went viral, and participated in television and radio segments. Support was incredible, and communities rallied

around their officers.

With all of the outstanding work the organization has contributed to the law enforcement community, there are also additional services offered to help the mission. Through special grants, services have been expanded to K9 first aid kits, training suits, dog crates, and GPS tracking collars. The need for equipment is constantly growing.



Another new product on the horizon that Vested Interest in K9s is looking into providing for law enforcement communities is a K9 simulator. A simulator is a very realistic K9 training device resembling an actual dog, which is designed for veterinarians and trauma doctors to train them on how to perform emergency procedures on a K9 who has suffered a traumatic injury. The device provides real-world scenarios to medical professionals who train K9 handlers on how to save their partner's life who may have encountered one of these line of duty injuries.

If people would like to donate or help volunteer with the organization, they can visit www.vik9s.org or call **508-824-6978**. Once on the website, there are links to explain the donation process and how donations work. Any donations less than the cost of a vest will go into a general account and will be used where needed most. If people prefer, they

can earmark a donation for a vest, and there is a link on the website to do that as well. As noted earlier, people who donate a vest can choose a sentiment to be embroidered on the front chest of the vest for the K9 receiving it.

Police K9s are a member of the department they represent and are a valued and beloved member of the officer's family. **In most cases, they live with the officer. Often, the human officer and the K9 spend more time together than the officer does with their human family.** Their bond is strong, and the goal of Vested Interest in K9s is to protect the K9 partner. Just like those of us in the camping world who take our pets everywhere with us, these special dogs go everywhere with their handler. However, unlike my dogs' easy and



relaxing day at the campground, these dogs risk their lives daily to ensure we are all safe. Thus, every means of protection should be provided to them. Vested Interest In K9s believes that every working dog should have access to a ballistic vest, and they will continue to vest these important members of the law enforcement community for years to come.

If someone is interested in sponsoring a vest, they can have an embroidered message on the breastplate of the vest as a memorial or message for the K9.