

10. K-9s (Canines): “Where’s My Toy?”

Official: “Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to honor Adam, the sheriff’s department’s K-9 and his handler deputy . . .

Adam: “Where’s my toy?”

Official: . . . their fight against drugs makes our community safer . . .

Adam: “Where’s my toy?”

Official: . . . for their teamwork and dedication we present this engraved plaque which reads . . .

Adam: “That’s not my toy! Where’s my toy?”

Anyone with a dog has many, many stories to tell. One of the first lessons I learned visiting grade school classrooms was that one unconscious reference to a dog could sabotage the entire lesson plan. I never saw any students drooling, but casually mentioning the word “dog” seemed to signal some Pavlovian conditioned reflex, causing the children to uncontrollably bark out comments about their own family pet. On the other hand, I’ve also seen how these same students, once they reach middle school, are much less likely to spontaneously ramble on with personal narratives about man’s best friend.

In one small seventh grade class I visited regularly, we had been discussing the effects and consequences of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and methamphetamine. As a follow up we invited our department’s canine (K-9) handler to bring his drug detecting dog into the classroom as a show-and-tell visitor. I knew he would be well received, especially after learning that all the students but one had a pet dog at home. This was clearly a dog-friendly group.

Our K-9 handler had learned a thing or two about presentations before ever stepping into our classroom. He knew that if he were going to hold the audience’s attention he would have to keep the four-legged, tongue-wagging, hyperactive, charismatic star off center stage until late in the show. This was an officer with public speaking savvy.

“Good morning, class!” I welcome the students. “As promised we have our department’s K-9 officer here today. Please help me welcome Deputy Charles Collins.”

Clap, clap, clap.

“Now, I’d like each of you to introduce yourself to Deputy Collins in this manner. Say your first name, and if you have a dog, tell us its breed and then its name.”

“My name is Carly. I have a mini dachshund named Taffy.”

“My name is Tyler. We have a Collie named Rocky.”

“My name is Amanda, and my family has a schnauzer we call Sammie.”

“I’m Tiffany. I have a miniature Yorkshire terrier named Samson and a miniature longhaired Dachshund who answers to Brandy.”

“Hi, my name’s Sarah and my mini Shelty is Zoe.”

“I’m Elizabeth. We don’t have a dog, but I know it’s weird, we have eight cats. Their names are Smokey, Kitty, Sassy, Shadow, Lucky, Princess, Boots, and Ugly.”

“My name is Raven. We have a retriever by the name of Simba and a pit bull named O.J.”

“My name’s Cody. My dog’s name is Duke and I don’t know what kind of dog he is.”

“I’m Trevor. My dog, Zeke, is a mixture of Lab and Malamute.”

“My name is Kristin, and our dog is a Lab mix named Oreo.”

“Hello, my name’s Brooke. We have three dogs of unknown breeds. They are Charlie, Daisy, and Dakota.”

“Thank you very much for those introductions!” I respond enthusiastically. “I didn’t know there were so many dogs out there! Elizabeth, we’ve got cats, not dogs, at our house too. Their names are Butch, a Manx; Hoover, a Siamese; Gray, a Russian blue, and Home Boy or Homes, a Tabby.

“It’s time now to have Officer Collins tell us about his dog. Are you ready to listen to Officer Collins?”

“Yes!” the class eagerly responds.

“Deputy Collins! Take it from here . . .”

“Like Sarge says, the sheriff’s office has a dog, a Belgian Malinois, named Adam. He’s two-and-a-half years old and has been helping us out for the last six months. He was born in Europe. His job is to find hidden drugs.

“Adam has already notched several canine assists where he discovered illegal drugs or drug paraphernalia while checking out cars that other officers have stopped. He’s also been involved in searches of houses when there’s been a search warrant obtained.

“When Adam is requested at the scene of a stopped vehicle, it’s because of suspicious circumstances. Once we arrive, I lead him around the vehicle, and he smells the air outside the car. Doing this is not a violation of a person’s rights. If Adam determines drugs are nearby, he alerts. That means he will paw at the place where he smells an odor. When he shows me, the handler, that he smells the scent of drugs then there’s a reason for a search warrant. Usually, despite the strong possibility that drugs will be discovered and the driver arrested, the suspect consents to allow the officers to search the car.

“Some of you may wonder how drug dogs are selected . . .”

“Pardon me, Officer Collins,” I interrupt, “If drivers know there are drugs hidden in the car, then why do they give permission for the officer to search it?” I’d been thinking about that question for a long time. I figured that the suspect assumed the officer would search the car anyway so he or she might as well cooperate.

“There are several likely reasons,” Officer Collins begins, “People think that it’s hidden so well that we won’t find it, they don’t want to appear guilty by denying us permission, and they think that if they give consent then we won’t search it as thoroughly. Usually they plan on pleading ignorance to the drugs being hidden in the car if they’re discovered, and other times they’re just so nervous that they go along with the official request. But even if we don’t get permission from the driver, we have probable cause—that’s a reasonable belief that a crime has been committed—so we’ll most likely get a search warrant anyway. It’ll just take longer.”

Glancing over at me, Officer Collins continues. “Now, I was beginning to tell you about how police dogs are selected.” (I sit on my hands.) “Sometimes people tell me that they think they might have a dog that would be a good candidate for drug detection or tracking. The first test is to find out how much they like to chase a ball or a toy. If the dog chases a ball until its tongue is about ready to fall off, then an object like a metal pipe is substituted for the toy. Since dogs don’t like to put metal in their mouth, it’s a real test to see if they’re willing to pick it up and bring it back. The canine is also tested to see if it will retrieve an object from a place it’s not comfortable going, like water or thick bushes. If these tests are successful, then the dog has displayed a level of obsession or skill that shows it may be suitable for police work.

“The most common breeds of dogs that are trained to find drugs are Belgian Malinois, Dutch shepherds, and German shepherds. But it can be any breed of dog, from a Labrador to a Chihuahua.” At the mention of a Chihuahua the students laugh collectively as they imagine the tiny animal in police action. The response from the students assures me that they indeed are listening. For a second I visualize a big, husky, uniformed officer at one end of the leash being tugged on by a single-minded Chihuahua barking, “*The marijuana’s over here!*”

“Once a canine is identified who wants to play with an object all the time, then the trainer begins using a little canvas bag as the dog’s toy.” At this point Officer Collins reaches behind his neck, and as if he were a magician, pulls out of the air a flesh-tone bag measuring about ten-by-four inches and a couple of inches thick.

“Inside the canvas bag is a plastic bag with the scent of marijuana in it,” the sheriff’s deputy explains. “This causes the dog being trained to learn to associate the scent with the toy. The trainer will throw the canvas bag while playing with the canine, and soon the four-legged recruit learns that when he discovers the scent it means the toy is nearby. Since the toy is the most important thing in the world to my dog, he will search for it relentlessly in order to be able to play.

“Dogs can alert the handler to the scent of drugs by either passively sitting down, aggressively barking, biting, or scratching. With Adam, we hide marijuana, and when he starts discovering where its smell is coming from, he barks and we do nothing. He bites at the location and we do nothing, but when he first scratches at the spot, then we immediately throw his toy down at his feet to reinforce his behavior. This is the procedure used repeatedly to train him to learn that if he wants to play with his toy, he needs to discover the exact location of the scent.

“The drug dogs don’t know that what they’re doing has anything to do with drugs. But once they’re trained to find their toy with the scent of marijuana, then we can gradually introduce the dog to the smell of other drugs or narcotics that have different scents, like cocaine, heroin, and meth.

“Adam is also trained to track people by their individual scent, but he’s not trained in apprehension or handler protection work.

“Sarge, didn’t the department have a K-9 years ago that was trained to apprehend fleeing subjects?”

“That’s right,” I confirm. “Twenty years ago there was a German shepherd named Yackel von Baerenzwinger. For good reason he was called by his first name, Yackel. Besides being trained to locate drugs, he protected his handler, could chase down suspects, and locate them when they were hiding. I remember one night on third shift when our detail responded to a silent alarm at the Brown Wheel Tavern. We knew at least one burglar was holed up there. The after-hours visitor had started to leave through the rear door, but he quickly changed his mind and direction after facing two barrels from a deputy’s shotgun.

“Yackel and his handler found the suspect hiding in the attic under some insulation. Later that night, after the arrest, I walked up to the K-9 officer’s patrol car to congratulate him. Then I did something stupid. Although the entire department had been cautioned not to make any aggressive movements towards the handler, in my excitement, I forgot.

“I told the officer, sitting in his car, ‘Good job,’ as I slapped him firmly on the shoulder. Yackel rose up, gave a deep, fierce growl and prepared to jump through the front seat window from his position in the rear seat. The handler immediately ordered him to stop as I quickly withdrew my hand and gave a nervous laugh.”

After my story, the students start raising their hands with questions. Officer Collins welcomes this transition before getting Adam from his patrol unit.

“Does Adam live at the police station?” asks one curious member of the audience.

“No, he lives with me and my family. He gets time off from work just like the other officers.”

Another hand goes up as the student blurts out, “Does Adam have a bulletproof vest? I saw on TV where this K-9 had a bulletproof vest to protect him when he went into a house to search for criminals.”

“Some K-9s do wear body armor to help protect them from getting injured or killed if they get shot, but Adam doesn’t have a vest like that. We only use him to search for drugs when the situation is under our control. We don’t send him into a building on his own to find someone that might be armed. I’m always with him when he’s searching for drugs or people. This keeps him safer, and it also allows me to testify in court to what he discovers on the premises.”

“But what if Adam gets shot and killed?” the same student continues, completing his original thought.

“Then we’d have a police funeral for him, and if we caught the person who shot him there would be criminal charges and penalties for harming our K-9. It’s unlawful to inflict harm, permanent disability, or death upon a police dog,” Collins quotes from a state statute.

“What happens when Adam gets old or can’t detect drugs anymore?” inquires another student who could someday be a retirement planner.

I wonder the same thing. After years of service, surely the dog wouldn’t be abandoned, but on the other hand, I can’t imagine a Kansas Police and Fire canine retirement plan supported by the county commissioners.

Deputy Collins explains. “On other departments that have had dogs retire from active duty, the handler is often given the first opportunity to adopt his partner into his home as a family member. Actually, K-9s make great pets and are usually good with children. You can imagine how willing they are to play while retrieving a ball or other toy.”

As Collins describes the advantage to children, I wonder how the canine would adapt to a household without a lot of activity. Wouldn’t he go stir crazy?

“How much did he cost?” is another pertinent question that interests me.

“His purchase price, including his training to detect drugs and track people, was \$10,000,” responds Officer Collins.

“Whoa! Wow! Ten thousand dollars!” The class of students reacts in disbelief. I feel myself choking. Deputy Collins is unapologetic about the price. “There’s a community group of business people concerned about the dangers of illegal drugs harming our children. They want to help make a difference. They donated the money to purchase Adam for the sheriff’s office. There’s also a local veterinarian that donates his services for Adam’s health care. We are clearly fortunate to have citizens that do more than talk about the drug problem.”

“How long does a K-9 work looking for drugs before he gets tired?” questions another student.

“Dogs are kind of like people in that it all depends on the working conditions and their drive or eagerness. And dogs, like people, need breaks from constantly being on alert. They also need success to find their toy once in a while. Otherwise they feel like giving up. When Adam is searching a large building, I can tell when he’s starting to get tired. I let him find his toy so he can have a break.”

Then the school’s assistant principal, who has a photo of her black Labrador on her office desk, jumps into our discussion. “When we have our school searched for drugs, sometimes Officer Collins and Adam will have another K-9 team work with them. That way they can quickly check all the lockers while classes are in session. Having two drug dogs working at the same time helps prevent fatigue,” she accurately states, reinforcing Officer Collins’ previous answer.

Unable to keep my mouth shut and inappropriately trying to be funny about a serious subject, I add: “I sure hope none of you have drugs on you today!”

The administrator puts me in my place. “What do you mean *today*? None of you should be using drugs any day. It’s not smart or healthy to use drugs, and you can get caught. The high school also has regular searches for drugs by the K-9s. They even check the cars in the parking lot.”

I like the way she is informative and at the same time proactive about the use of drugs. She lets them know while they are in middle school that the entire district is doing its best to keep the educational establishment a drug-free zone.

Finally, a student asks the question everyone else has been eager for: “When will we get to see Adam?”

Officer Collins glances at the clock and answers, “I’ll go get him as soon as I explain what’s going to happen when we return. First off, is there anyone here scared of dogs they don’t know?”

“No,” is the unanimous answer.

“Second, when we come in the room, Adam will be anxious to find his toy. Sergeant Potter, with the school administration’s permission, has hidden some drugs in the room for Adam to try to locate. When he detects the drugs, he will paw at the location and I will reward him with his toy.

“Last thing, please don’t pet him if he walks past you. I’ll let you pet him towards the end of the class, if you want. Does everyone understand?” he concludes. The class says they understand, then visibly grow eager to finally meet Officer Collins’ partner. As the K-9 officer heads out the door to the parking lot, I stand up and say, “Now I can tell you a story about Officer Collins.”

I explain to the class that not only do the K-9s need to be trained, but the handlers too have to be certified in their knowledge and performance. Then I tell a story about Officer Collins’ first day on the job with Adam when they were invited to participate in an actual search warrant. It was a house where the officers were looking for illegal drugs.

“When the newly trained team of two first entered the suspect’s house through the kitchen door, Adam headed directly for the trash can. There, clearly visible, was a partially eaten hamburger resting on top of a McDonald’s sack.

“Officer Collins was disappointed in Adam, especially after all their training, that he would be so unfocused on drugs but excited by food. So, as Adam kept pulling towards the trash can, Collins pulled him back, called him off, and took him into another room to begin a calmer search. Adam eventually did discover drugs in an upstairs bedroom drawer, but the biggest stash was found by a detective searching the trash. Inside the McDonald’s sack, which was under the partially eaten hamburger in the kitchen, was a sizeable amount of methamphetamine. Officer Collins learned that very first day to trust Adam’s drug detecting abilities even when it might appear that the canine was off track.”

Just then, Adam appears at the classroom doorway with his handler a leash behind. Adam is straining to get into action, to find his toy, as the students give a collective sigh: “He’s so

cute!” Officer Collins begins walking backwards, encouraging Adam to search high and low as they traverse around the perimeter of the classroom. They work a bookcase, teacher’s desk, and a metal filing cabinet before Adam stops, then starts pawing at a cabinet door, as if to say, “*I found my toy!*” Immediately, Officer Collins reaches up behind his neck and throws Adam’s canvas bag at the dog’s feet. Adam quickly chomps on it, his head tossing side-to-side, displaying great excitement at his discovery.

As Adam plays, Officer Collins recovers the green leafy substance in a plastic bag and secures it in a tightly fitting plastic container. Then he plays a bit with Adam, grabbing each end of the canvas bag while it’s strongly gripped in Adam’s mouth, lifting the K-9 a foot off the floor. At this the students again laugh, appreciating the dog’s determination to hold on to its toy. But, when ordered, Adam gives up his most prized possession to his handler. Together they play toss and fetch before it’s time to give the students an opportunity to pet Adam. It seems everyone wants to touch him, including the assistant principal.

The police dog named Adam is clearly a welcome change to the sometimes sterile school environment. Adam and Officer Collins are ambassadors, a bridge connecting law enforcement with the youth of the school community. Working together they are making a difference.