

York Region's Canine Unit celebrates 25-year success story in Aurora



By Brock Weir

As one of the longest-serving members of the York Regional Police's Canine Unit, Sgt. Mike McGuigan has seen many changes in policing.

Technology has changed the playing field in many areas, but when it comes to training and serving with the four-legged members of the YRP's canine unit, much stays the same. This steady approach, however, can be a double-edged sword.

?We are sometimes an afterthought when technology fails,? mused McGuigan. ?The fact of the matter is footprints in the snow always seem to end or converge with other footprints. Cell phone pings are always within 500 or 750 metres, and sometimes the camera on the helicopter is down. The weather conditions aren't safe to fly, or the foliage might be too thick, but the dog's nose will always be there and, in many cases, it will prove the officers, investigators, and the handlers wrong.?

Speaking to a packed house at the YRP's Aurora headquarters last week, McGuigan was somewhat preaching to the converted as members of the Canine Unit past and present came together to mark the unit's 25th anniversary.



Sgt. Mike McGuigan

?We have come a long way from our unheated offices and kennels on Industrial Parkway to the facilities we are so lucky to have today,? said Superintendent Karen Noakes.

According to Noakes, 48 dogs have served in the canine unit since its inception in 1989, and while just three dogs blazed that trail at the very beginning, 16 dogs now serve.

?What the statistics don't tell are the stories behind each of those numbers, stories of dedicated and highly skilled teamwork, working long hours, often in difficult terrain and difficult situations, supporting frontline officers and ensuring our citizens feel safe and secure,? added Deputy Chief Tom Carrique. ?The mission is satisfied by the Canine Unit working very closely with frontline officers and specialized units like air support to apprehend the most dangerous of offenders and safely locate the most vulnerable of missing people.

?Since the inception of the Canine Unit, the dogs have been directly responsible for more than 1,500 arrests and successfully

locating close to 100 missing people. Being a member of the Canine Unit requires the best of the best. It demands the most physically and mentally fit officers, individuals who are disciplined, intuitive, and committed to the organization and the community by putting service above self.?

This discipline and commitment can best be exemplified by the philosophy members of the Canine Unit live by, and that is the police service dog is not just a dog, or a partner on duty, but a member of each officer's family. For McGuigan, this philosophy extends to the belief that ?you get the dog you deserve.?

?There was only one Rin Tin Tin,? he said, noting the extent of the training that goes into forging the bond between officer and dog. The dog has the talent and the ability, but it is the job of their human partners to bring out the best in them.

?Every canine officer has been dispatched to a number of serious calls, and it is expected we find the missing person or suspect who has just assaulted an officer, or committed a serious crime,? said McGuigan. ?We have all been dispatched to help find missing children, a parent with Alzheimer's, or someone experiencing mental health issues. It is then when we, as officers, realise where our dog's strengths and weaknesses are located. That is why training is so important. The simple fact of the matter is if we don't commit to training them then we, as a team, fail operationally.

?Over the years, things have changed with our department and technology seems to have taken over. It may create easier fixes for solving or assisting in the investigations of certain crimes, but in canine, despite all the advances in technology, the same basic principles remain. With canine training, the first officers selected for the unit in 1989 did what the next officer selected in 2015 will do.?

After York Regional Police Chief Eric Jolliffe assisted in presenting each member of the Canine Unit, past and present, with a challenge medal, a special commemorative tree was unveiled just behind the Aurora Headquarters. It wasn't simply to mark the unit's milestone anniversary. The ?Lydia Tree? was planted with the singular purpose of paying tribute to the late Lydia Sullivan who was instrumental in laying the foundations of the unit.

Through a number of fundraisers and community events, Ms. Sullivan raised \$5,000 to purchase Police Service Dog ?Lappy.? A long-time supporter of the work the York Regional Police and the Toronto Police Force do in their respective communities, Ms. Sullivan forged a unique relationship with the Canine Unit, which continued until her death in 2008 at the age of 80.

?She was just an amazing, amazing gem of a person,? recalled Detective Constable Bill Charnock, who worked closely with Ms. Sullivan in securing Lappy. ?If there was a president of the York Regional Police Canine Fan Club, Lydia Sullivan would have been that person. Lydia needed no recognition. She was perfectly happy to work behind the scenes to do what she could to raise funds to support the YRP Canine Unit and the Toronto Police service dogs.

?All of her dogs made her extremely proud and I know it would put a smile on her face to know the dogs have a place to rest under a tree dedicated to her memory.?