

The Carmel Pine Cone

Volume 106 No. 1

www.carmelpinecone.com

January 3-9, 2020

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These experts know exactly when to offer a helping paw

By LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

PROSECUTORS AT the Monterey County District Attorney's Office know all too well that bringing criminals to justice begins with getting victims to talk about what happened to them. When a case is particularly traumatic, eliciting those details can require a very sensitive touch – or even a nuzzle.

What does Odie do?

Odie and Namaste are the D.A.'s highly trained comfort canines who are experts at bringing down the tension in an interview room, offering quiet reassurance to crime victims and their families and enabling them to calm down and speak.

If you're a fan of "The Gavel Falls" on page 4A of each week's Pine Cone, you've often read of Odie's work – Namaste isn't as famous yet – and may have wondered what, exactly, such a dog does.

Often, it's as simple as resting their head or perhaps a paw on the person, or simply standing nearby, with their timeless, accepting eyes offering reassurance and comfort. Sometimes, during a particularly stressful case, it can even be their attorney who needs a moment of composure with the dogs.

Odie is a black Labrador-golden retriever mix, now 8, who joined the office staff in 2013. Namaste is a 3-year old yellow Lab who's been on the job for a year. "Odie is an amazing, insightful dog," said Monterey County District Attorney Jeannine Pacioni, who took over the job from longtime DA Dean Flippo in January 2019. "Odie's first trial was a child abuse case, where a 5-year old had been submerged in hot water and had third-degree burns. Odie's reassuring presence made it possible for the child to speak in court."

When Odie or Namaste is brought into the courtroom, the dog must be placed under the witness stand, out of the jury's view. The concern is that their presence might influence the jury, said Pamela Patterson, manager of the county's Victim/Witness Assistance Program. If people sense the dog's sympathy, they may give undue consideration to the witness or the victim.

"We never want to jeopardize the case," Patterson said. "When we considered bringing in a comfort canine, we had to reach out to the judges, the sheriff's department, the bailiffs, all of our staff, to ask how they'd feel about having a dog in the office, as well as the courtroom. We received overwhelming approval."

Hanging out at home

She said anyone involved in a case can request aid from the dogs. Sometimes, Namaste just follows her into one of the interview rooms. "The dogs love going in there. They love jumping up on the couch and lying there." In addition to their familiar spot beneath the witness chair, they might accompany someone on a pre-trial tour of the courtroom, to help them get comfortable, or sit with them during a sentencing hearing.

Patterson is Namaste's handler. At the end of the day, the dog goes home with her to live the off-duty life of a family pet.

"It's just me at home, with a 3-pound Chihuahua and a 15-pound cat," said Patterson. "At most, the cat bats her paw at Namaste, who ignores it, and the Chihuahua just

watches. It's a little more entertaining when my adult children and grandchildren come over.

Even at home, though, Namaste's training continues – to keep her behavior consistent.

Special training

Odie goes home with DA Chief Investigator Ryan McGuirk, whose children feed the dog, which teaches Odie to trust the little ones. Odie has a co-handler, victim witness program coordinator Alma Sanchez, who trades off with McGuirk in working with Odie.

When morning comes, Odie and Namaste don their service vests and head back to work, ready to serve and protect. People in the office don't interact with the uniformed dogs, and they are not given treats. Ever.

"These dogs take on a superhero quality when the vest goes on," McGuirk said. "They shift from family dog to working dog, and they know they need to be there for the victim or client who needs the most support. We have had some terrible news in this office, and these dogs get people through it."

Odie and Namaste are specially trained comfort dogs from Canine Companions for Independence, a nonprofit organization in Santa Rosa, which prepares assistance dogs for people with disabilities, as well as expertly trained dogs carefully partnered with working professionals in healthcare, criminal justice, and educational settings.

"They don't just give you the dog. After a lengthy application process, both Pam and Ryan spent many weeks in Santa Rosa, undergoing an intense training on how to handle the dogs," said Pacioni who, at that moment, had Namaste draped across her lap. Occasionally, the dog looked up and licked the district attorney's face.

Each canine, said to be valued at \$50,000, was provided to the district attorney's office free of charge. The office pays for the care and feeding of the dogs through a fund created with unclaimed restitution dollars. "We have to keep these dogs like fine-tuned machines to get years of service from them," Pacioni said.

Patterson and McGuirk also pay close attention to the animals' mental and emotional well-being.

"Both Odie and Namaste worked in the aftermath of the Gilroy Garlic Festival shooting, which took a toll on them," McGuirk said. "They'd go to the family assistance center at 7 a.m., ready to work, yet by the end of the day, they were looking drained. Let's just say they weren't going to chase a tennis ball at that point."

Then the dogs would go home, slip out of their service vests, have some dinner, and rest. The next day, they were ready to return to work and give their attention to those who needed it.



PHOTO/PHILIP M. GEIGER

The Monterey County DA's office enjoys help from trained comfort dogs Namaste (left, with handler Pamela Patterson) and Odie (resting on Chief Investigator Ryan McGuirk's lap).

"We have 15,000 cases a year, and attached to every case is a victim," McGuirk said. "We need to build a rapport with these people, and by walking in with a comfort dog, the rapport comes more easily. These dogs give people an opportunity for comfort while reliving their life's most horrific moments."

Many people who feel a connection to these canines have a hard time leaving them. Patterson hit on the idea of small stuffed animals that look like Odie and Namaste, to give victims something to clutch and take with them.

"There is no judgment with a dog," Pacioni said. "People are not going to be told they're good or bad; the dog is just there, providing comfort, love and support, which is priceless."



PHOTO/PHILIP M. GEIGER

Namaste, a dog trained to help people stay calm in the courtroom, seems to be right at home with Monterey County District Attorney Jeannine Pacioni. She said the dogs "offer comfort, love and support" without judgment.