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PET DISH / SANDRA ECKSTEIN, seckstein@ajc.com

Georgia's police dogs suit up for protection

Susie Jean was watching "America's Most Wanted" when a police dog on the show was shot. Jean, who had two German shepherds of her own, cried with the officer but also was angered by what she saw.

"I turned to my husband and said, 'That shouldn't have happened. Why didn't the dog have a protective vest or something?'" said Jean.

Haunted by the officer's tears for his lost partner, Jean started calling Atlanta area police departments to ask if their dogs had protective vests. When she discovered most didn't, she founded Vest 'N P.D.P. (Police Dog Protection).

For the past four years, Jean has raised money to buy vests for local police dogs. The vests retail for \$1,100, but a local uniform shop, Uniform Sales of America in Lithia Springs, sells them to Jean at cost. Each time she raises \$695, Jean buys another vest.

"My goal is to protect all the dogs in the Atlanta area," said Jean, who until recently lived in Lithia Springs. "These officers love their dogs so much. Most live with them and work with them. They're together 24 hours a day."

In the past four years, Jean has raised enough money to buy 40 bullet-and-stab-resistant vests for dogs, ranging from the Douglasville Police Department to MARTA to the Atlanta Police Department's 12 bomb detection dogs at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

"Every time we go into a dangerous situation, we're wearing vests, so it gives our dogs the same level of protection," said Sgt. James Mason, with the MARTA police's K-9 unit, which has nine bomb detection dogs. All but one of



Vest 'N P.D.P.

Susie Jean founded Vest 'N P.D.P. to raise money for dogs like Bosko (with Atlanta police partner **Mark Wowk**).

the last one is about to be delivered, Mason said.

Mason said the dogs are a substantial investment for the department, so they were grateful for the vests.

"It takes 12 to 18 months to train a dog, then another three to six months of training with the handler," Mason said. "It takes a lot of time to get a certified working bomb dog."

Robert Yurman, of Uniform Sales of America, said the company believes so strongly in what Jean is doing that it not only sells her the vests at cost, but it also personalizes them with a side panel that says "Police" or "Sheriff" and embroiders the dog's name on the vest. The vests are customized

can often be used for other dogs.

"The dogs don't seem to mind them," said Yurman, who has attended several presentations. "They almost seem proud to wear them."

Sgt. Robert Bailey, with the APD K-9 unit at the airport, said they had wanted vests for their dogs, but with money tight, funds weren't available. So when Jean offered to raise the money, they were grateful.

"We were amazed by her dedication to outfitting every canine in Georgia," Bailey said. "And she's slowly and surely doing it."

Despite a recent move to New Mexico, Jean said she will continue outfitting Georgia police dogs with vests as money allows. But she's also taking requests from other states where police have heard of her program. Wal-Mart has given her grants, but most of her funding comes from small donations, she said, and 100 percent of a donation is put toward the cost of vests.

"These officers work so hard to protect their communities, and these dogs work so hard to protect us," Jean said. "We owe it to them to protect them any way we can."

Two fund-raisers for Vest 'N P.D.P. are being held at Precious Pets in Norcross on Monday from 1-5 p.m. and Saturday at 7 p.m. A representative of the organization will be there, and shop owner Gayle Dalton Smith said she also expects several police dogs to stop by. The shop is at 9 S. Peachtree St. 770-416-7387, www.preciouspetsga.com.

For more information on Vest 'N P.D.P.: www.vestnrdp.com or 678-637-7056.