

Socorroan outfits dogs with bulletproof vests

By Argen Duncan

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A Socorro woman recently teamed up with a famous racecar driver to give bulletproof, stab-proof vests to 40 police dogs.

Susie Jean, president of Vest 'N' Police Dog Protection Inc., received a grant from the Tony Stewart Foundation during a trip to Indiana that involved meeting Stewart and interviews with radio and television stations.

Since 2002, Jean's organization has provided vests for 229 police dogs in more than 20 states. In New Mexico, 10 dogs, including Socorro's Apollo, have received the protection.

Three canines in Gallun — Gizmo, Mac and Max — received vests from Stewart's funds in July.

Recently, Jean, who moved to Socorro in 2006, applied for a grant from the foundation.

"And they picked me out of thousands to help," she said.

Two weeks before the trip to Indianapolis to receive the funds, Jean had emergency eye surgery. The doctor wouldn't allow her to fly, so Jean and her husband, Ross Sturdevant, drove 23 hours to the presentation.

"He had to be my driver," Jean said of her husband.

Through the foundation, Stewart provided \$27,800, enough for 40 vests. He told Jean it wouldn't be the last time he helped.

Jean called Stewart a generous man.

"He loves animals," Jean said.

Of the 40 vests, 27 went to Indiana State Police dogs immediately, three will be bought for Indiana State Police for dogs that will need them by the end of the year and 10 went to canines in New Mexico, Georgia, North Carolina and Minnesota. Jean presented the Indiana vests while she was in Indianapolis.



During the trip, Jean gave interviews about her work and Stewart's help for Indianapolis television stations and for two radio shows, the national Bob and Tom Show and the Wank and O'Brien Show on 97.1 Hank FM.

Stewart provided tickets for a NASCAR race at the O'Riley Raceway Park, where Jean and others watched from Stewart's fan suite and personal suite.

"They treated us pretty good," Jean said.

Since her return from Indiana, Jean has received requests for 51 more vests for dogs in 13 states.

"So hopefully with the public's help, we'll be able to vest them," she said.

Jean operates Vest 'N' P.D.P. with the help of one part-time volunteer and donations from the general public and Wal-Mart. She and Sturdevant pay some expenses, such as traveling to presentations, out of their pocket.

"I don't turn any canine down that requests a vest," Jean said. "It doesn't matter what state they're in; I try to get them money for that area to vest a dog."

Currently, Jean is working to have laws passed requiring states to provide vests for police dogs within their borders.

The vests sell for \$695, but the dogs cost thousands of dollars and are considered law officers, she said. Also, Jean said killing a police dog is a felony in most states.

While living in Georgia, Jean saw an episode of "America's Most Wanted" in which a canine was shot and killed while trying to catch a suspect. In 2002, she began raising funds to provide such dogs with protection.

"I couldn't just see it not happen," Jean said.

To contribute funds for police dog vests, visit www.vestnnpdp.com. Donations are tax-deductible.



Ross Sturdevant

NASCAR driver Tony Stewart poses with Susie Jean of Socorro during her trip to Indiana to receive a \$27,800 grant from his foundation to provide protective vests for 40 police dogs.