

American Profile

CENTRAL EDITION



Protecting K-9 COPS

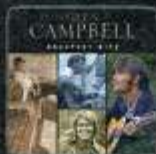
Susie Jean shields
crime-fighting dogs
from flying bullets

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Protecting K-9 COPS

Susie Jean safeguards police dogs with protective vests.



In 2002, Susie Jean was watching a television newscast at her home in Douglasville, Ga. (pop. 20,065), when she saw a horrific scene: a fleeing criminal fatally shooting a police dog.

"I had to do something," says Jean, 51, who was grieving over

the recent loss of her two beloved German shepherds.

The next day she contacted her local police department and learned that, like most police departments, it didn't have money to equip its K-9 counterparts with bullet-resistant vests, which can cost more

than \$700 apiece. That's when she decided to raise the money herself.

"I started with donation boxes at pet store counters and veterinary offices," recalls Jean, who now lives in Socorro, N.M. (pop. 8,877).

She then contacted Robert Yurman of Uniform Sales of America, a Georgia-based distributor of ballistic vests for dogs, and explained her plans to donate vests to police departments across the nation. "She was certainly doing a worthwhile venture," Yurman says, "so we said we'd sell her the vests at our cost to help keep her costs down."

Within two months Jean had raised enough money to purchase two vests for the Douglasville

Police Department. Inspired to increase her fundraising efforts, she started a nonprofit organization called Vest 'N P.D.P. (Police Dog Protection), and created the website www.vestnpdp.com to promote the cause. Word of her work spread among police departments, and vest requests began pouring in.

One such request came from David Carleton, 46, a deputy sheriff and dog handler in Forsyth County, N.C. Carleton met his German shepherd Blek while serving in Iraq in 2003. The dog, which specializes in explosives detection, wore a pack that carried Carleton's ammunition. "I made a deal with him that if he kept me alive, then I'd take care of him when we came back," Carleton says.

When he and Blek went to work for the sheriff's department in 2006, a ballistics vest was part of Carleton's uniform, but not Blek's.



Canine members of the Douglasville (Ga.) Police Department, posing with their human handlers, were among the first to receive bullet-resistant vests through Jean's fundraising efforts.

So Carleton called Jean. “She pretty much took care of all the rest,” he says. Five weeks later the dog was parading around in a new Kevlar vest with his name embroidered on the side.

The vest is one of more than 260 that she’s supplied to police departments across the nation since 2002. Whenever possible, Jean personally presents the vests to police officers who request them, spending her own money to make the trip.

“I want people to know that 97 to 99 percent of donations go to purchasing vests,” she says. “When I travel, I pay my own way.”

Although her organization is small—her husband, Ross, is her most dedicated volunteer—her efforts mean a great deal to police officers with canine companions.

“Susie Jean is an amazing person,” says Chris Obenland, a Houston, Texas, police officer and dog handler who received a vest for his Belgian Malinois, named Shadow, in 2007.

“You become one with that dog, you’re a team,” Obenland says. “I love Shadow to death. I see him more than I see my family. I want him to survive any attack. Susie Jean’s work will help make that possible.”

Jean raises most of the money through private donations from individuals, as well as a few grants. It’s a lot of work, but she remains passionate about her mission.

“A dog goes out with no fear and does what he’s been trained to do without a thought for personal danger,” Jean says. “My efforts are a small price to pay for our police dogs that protect their human partner as well as our communities.”

Story by Robyn Harrison of San Antonio, N.M.



More than 260 police dogs have been outfitted with ballistic vests since 2002.