

Bulletproof Vests Go to the Dogs

■ Socorro woman's nonprofit group helps protect canines

By ROZANNA M. MARTINEZ
Journal Staff Writer

A 2002 episode of "America's Most Wanted" showed a police officer grieving after his patrol dog was fatally shot.

The episode moved Susie Jean of Socorro to do something about preventing more K-9 deaths on duty; she wanted to provide protective vests for police canines.

On Wednesday, Hero — a patrol and narcotics dog in Rio Rancho — became the latest beneficiary of Jean's work.

Jean, who lived in Douglasville, Ga., at the time, was hit particularly hard by the show because she had just lost two German shepherds to cancer. Not long after, she founded Vest 'N P.D.P. (Police Dog Protection) Inc., a nonprofit that collects donations to purchase bullet- and stab-proof vests for police dogs.

The vests, which cost \$695 each, can protect dogs from bullets, screwdrivers, scissors and knives.

"One shot or one stab, and they're gone," said Jean, who runs the organization with her husband, Ross Sturdevant. "Seven hundred dollars is not a whole heck of a lot of money."

On Wednesday, Hero proudly showed off his vest at a news conference at the Rio Rancho Department of Public Safety. A police dog in Socorro and one in Alamogordo also have received vests.

Hero's vest, which weighs about 2½ pounds and costs \$695, was tailor-made for him.

The German shepherd, just shy of his fourth birthday, strutted around the DPS conference room with his handler, officer Ken Willey. The dog also jumped on a table at Willey's command to demonstrate his maneuverability in the vest.

One of Hero's more important duties is to search for suspects who are hiding or trying to flee from police.

"He's deployed from five to 20 times a weekend," said Willey, who trains with Hero 10 hours weekly with the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office. "Each time presents a danger."

The vests retail between \$800 and \$900, but Uniform Sales of America sells them to Vest 'N P.D.P. for \$695, Jean said.

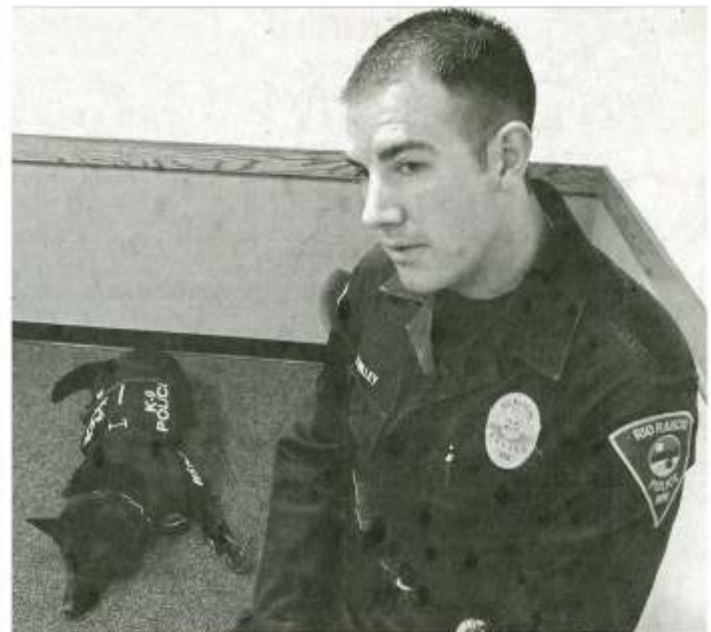
Nationwide, 87 police K-9s — in New Mexico, Georgia, Texas, California and Alaska — have received vests purchased by Vest 'N P.D.P.

Law enforcement agencies in need of the vests can contact Vest 'N P.D.P. at its Web site www.vestnudp.com.

Hero, a patrol dog with the Rio Rancho Department of Public Safety, wears the new bullet- and stab-proof vest donated by Vest 'N P.D.P.



ROBERTO E. ROSALES/JOURNAL



ROBERTO E. ROSALES/JOURNAL

Hero, a 4-year-old German shepherd, is assigned to Rio Rancho police officer Ken Willey. Hero is wearing his new bullet- and stab-proof vest.