



Becky Shropshire: Searching for the lost and missing

Published 10:25am Saturday, November 21, 2015

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By Mark Schmerling

If a child becomes lost, if a mentally challenged adult wanders off, if a hiker does not return on schedule, or if others are missing in this region, chances are the trainers and dogs from Southern Pride Search Dogs will join the hunt to locate that missing person.

“I have been working with the dogs for almost 14 years,” said Saluda’s Becky Shropshire. Her passion is working with her two dogs and with fellow Southern Pride members, to locate missing individuals.

Shropshire was in one such hunt only recently; the missing teen was found alive and safe in the woods of eastern Tennessee on Nov. 17 after being out for about six days.

Becoming a member of such a rescue group takes more than desire; it means a great deal of education and qualifying, then more education and more qualifying.

Shropshire's love of re-uniting lost folks with their families began innocently enough.

"My husband (Troy Shropshire) gave me a bloodhound puppy," she recalled. "All they're good for is for tracking people." To a bloodhounds' credit, she adds that they are also "really sweet." Understanding that first fact prompted Shropshire to research how to train her new puppy. Then, she needed to find an "in" with a group.

"Everything I read said unless you were a member of an organization, you would never get called for a search," she said. "I started looking for a team to join."

That team was North Carolina Rescue Dog Association in Clyde, a group that no longer exists.

Shropshire began the rigorous training required for inclusion.

"You kind of have to prove yourself that this is what you want to do, and you're willing to work for it."

Training included CPR and first aid, wilderness survival skills.

To be considered 'operational,' she said, you had to be able to follow a 12-hour-old trail of an unknown person. They also had 'advanced operational' (ability to follow a 24-hour-old trail), which is what Shropshire was striving for.

Much of the training was in the Bent Creek area of Pisgah National Forest. The dog had to be 'scent specific,' working from a portion of the "missing" person's clothing. One need not have a dog or all of the requisite skills of trackers to be a valuable team member; some volunteer to be the "missing" person to help train dogs and handlers.

In some wilderness situations, the missing person might provide the only human scent a dog will encounter. However, Bent Creek's hiking trails often provides distracting scents, which a successful dog must ignore.

Searchers generally run on 12-hour shift, and often work at night, depending on weather and terrain.

"You have to go when you have to go," Shropshire said, noting that family members might not always understand that their plans are not as important as the life of the missing individual.

County emergency management personnel and law enforcement officers often decide who will be called in, and what kind of shifts they'll work, and whether a search will be conducted at night.

Steep terrain, nearly impenetrable rhododendron thickets, streams, difficult-to-locate trails and logging roads often threaten to thwart rescue efforts.

Two types of dogs are employed to find missing persons. Bloodhounds are tracking dogs, working with scents on the ground. Air scent dogs are trained to pick up scent from the air, but can also pick up scent from the ground if they closely approach the missing person.

Shropshire has two dogs. K-9 Misty is a four-year-old bloodhound. Two-year-old Sage, also a female, is a lab mix, obtained from a shelter, and is an air scent dog.

Shropshire noted that Orville Banks who has 40 years' experience in tracking, founded Southern Pride Search Dogs. Shropshire is currently the team's president. Banks formerly taught members of North Carolina Rescue Dog Association.

Though 84, Banks was part of the recent rescue operation in the rugged mountains of eastern Tennessee.

"We travel," Shropshire pointed out. "They call us; we go." She and her dogs have been on searches in North and South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia. While most of those searches have taken place in mountainous terrain, she's worked near the North Carolina coast as well.

One memorable search took place in Virginia, the week before Christmas, where the missing person was a three-year-old boy.

"We got there about three a.m., and found that little boy alive and safe, with only minor frostbite at daybreak," Shropshire recalled. Had the boy and his dog not curled up together for some time before the rescue, the boy might not have been so lucky.

When the search party found the boy, the dog had only recently left the scene.

Successful episodes like that, Shropshire said, help searchers get "sucked in" to the activity.

But, not all searches end so happily. "Sometimes," Shropshire related, we know we're looking for someone dead."

These days, she said searches for lost hikers are less numerous than those for victims of Alzheimer's, autism and similar ailments that rob a person of the ability to recognize and relate to their surroundings.

"I have been on over 225 searches," Shropshire reported.

One of those involved a woman with Alzheimer's who walked away from an institution where she resided. After searches found her safe, she told them that she was hiding from "Indians." In her mind, she thought the sounds of rescuers working toward her were made by Indians.

Shropshire said that training now includes classes on searching for those with Alzheimer's and autism, and how those diseases affect individuals.

Most lost hikers are found within 24 hours, Shropshire said.

She offers the following advice to hikers, especially those not hiking in larger groups:

Tell at least one reliable person your starting point, your destination, and when you plan to return. Always carry water, a whistle (one becomes less tired blowing a whistle than by yelling), a flashlight (extra batteries are good to have also), and a large garbage bag (which can become an emergency rain jacket or shelter, and can help prevent heat loss.

“I really think everybody ought to have a map, and they need to know how to read a map,” said Shropshire, who uses compasses, maps and handheld GPS units. Searchers’ training includes wilderness navigation.

“We tell people if you get lost, stay in one place. It’s easier for rescuers to locate a sitting target than a moving one. People will be looking for them,” she assures.

Until this year, Southern Pride Search Dog team members paid for the total cost of every item used in the field, every education course, and all driving expenses. That has improved a bit, with some funding. Southern Pride Search Dogs is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, all-volunteer team. All Southern Pride K-9s are certified by the North Carolina Police Dog Association.

Financing or not, the team needs help from new members, Shropshire emphasized.

Anyone interested in working with search dogs, in providing field support, in enjoying sitting in the woods as dogs locate them in training exercises, is most welcome.

Self-employed individuals (Shropshire has her own landscaping business) often can more easily join searches.

Contact Shropshire at 828-749-2141. Donations may be made by sending checks and money orders to Southern Pride Search Dogs, P.O. Box 34, Saluda, NC 28773. E-mail the group at mtn2sea@sp-searchdogs.org.

To activate the team to find a lost or missing person, call 828-606 4184 or 919-698 6753.

“I enjoy doing it,” Shropshire said. “I love doing it. It’s what I do.”

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