

The Dog's Nose Knows

You won't believe what these working dogs can smell.

By Rose Boccio

Part II: Sniffing to Help Humans

Oreo moved through the Murrays' Pennington, N.J., home purposefully. The 5-year-old black Labrador Retriever mix was on a mission to find mold. Her owner and partner, Jason Earle, makes his living with Oreo's nose. And the Murray family couldn't be happier.

The scent of a mold byproduct is what Oreo is trained to detect.

Courtesy Jason Earle Jill and Brad Murray's 4-year-old daughter Caitlin suffers from severe asthma because of a mold allergy. Her medication was not enough to rid her of the barking cough, high fevers, and sinus infections. So the Murrays hired Lab Results, Earle's company in Princeton, N.J., to uncover their home's hidden mold.

Oreo is one of many working dogs who use their noses to help humans solve problems, from mold and termites in homes to detecting health changes and disease in their owners.

Earle's mold-detecting canine partner knows her job, but she also holds a special place in his heart. He rescued her from the Humane Society of North Pinellas in Clearwater, Fla., in 2003. "She's an angel," Earle says.

The Murrays agree. After two visits to their home, Oreo pinpointed the problems — mold in the chimney from a leak, and mold spores on studs supporting the staircase leading into the basement.

"The dog can smell the scent of one of the mold by-products, microbial gases," Earle explains. He takes Oreo through a typical house in about 15 minutes, commanding her to "seek, seek, seek." When she detects mold, she sits and points with her nose.

Investigators take samples, which are examined by specialists in a San Bruno, Calif., laboratory. Earle also uses Infrared imaging and other tools, but Oreo makes the search more efficient and accurate, he says.

Though costly at an average of \$500 for the inspection alone, the results are worth it, Jill Murray says. "The dog was amazing."

Sniffing out arson

Cheyenne, a 6-year-old black Lab mix, is called to the scene of a suspected arson with her handler Lt. Rick Aragon, a fire investigator with Portland Fire Rescue in Oregon. She is trained to alert Aragon when she detects a substance used to start the fire, usually gasoline, by sitting and pointing her nose at the source.

Cheyenne is key to arson investigations in Portland, Ore. Courtesy Rick Aragon "The dog is a tool," Aragon says. "She can help us quickly pinpoint where the accelerant is. Then, we take samples to send to the crime lab. We need to back it up with laboratory results."

Because they are on call 24 hours a day, Cheyenne lives and goes everywhere with Aragon. They've been working together for five years and, like many partnerships, the first year was the toughest.

"I had to learn to read the dog's body language. She wants to get the food reward and the praise, so she was doing false alerts," he says with a laugh. "I wanted to bring the dog in and kind of save the day, and the dog was fooling me."

Additional training created a more reliable team. "There are accelerant detection devices, but they're not very accurate. The chemists in the crime lab can test for ignitable liquids accurately with their equipment, but the dog's nose is even

more sensitive than that.”

Cheyenne’s amazing sniffing skills are respected beyond the Portland area. In summer 2006, she and Aragon headed to Kirkland, Wash., to investigate an arson used to cover up the murder of four people. Cheyenne detected accelerants at the crime scene, and investigators found a suspect living across the street. Aragon and Cheyenne searched the suspect’s home and found gasoline on a pair of shoes. The tread on the shoes matched a print found at the arson scene.

It was a high-profile case for Aragon, but just another day’s work for Cheyenne.

Rose Boccio is a freelance writer who lives in Naperville, Ill.

Part 1: Sniffing to Help Animals | Part 2: Sniffing to Help Humans