



Stranger Dogs & Deputies' Jobs

Canine Encounters class helps give deputies the tools and knowledge needed to read dog language, handle aggressive dogs while on the job

By Maria Sprow



On New Years Day, 2003, a family driving through Cookeville, Tenn., lived out a nightmare.

It started off from an accident: James Smoak — traveling with his wife, son and family dog — left his wallet on top of his Mercury station wagon after filling it with gas. He drove off, and the wallet and its contents went flying. A passerby called 9-1-1, telling a dispatcher that she had seen a green station wagon speeding down the interstate at 110 miles an hour and that money was flying all over the highway. When Tennessee Highway Patrol troopers responded to the scene, they found about \$445 in loose money and began investigating the incident as a carjacking or theft.

When they pulled the vehicle over an hour later, troopers ordered Smoak and his family out of the car and to their knees. The family was handcuffed and the car doors were open; the family alerted the troopers about their two family dogs, asking the troopers to close the doors, but troopers refused. One dog jumped out of the car and ran around the shoulder of the interstate, as dogs do, before running back toward the family.

Three seconds later, a trooper shot the dog dead. Smoak stood up to try to save the dog, but troopers forced him back down to his knees.

And it was all caught on police video, which was later released to the media and made its way on to YouTube and social media. The incident spurred investigations, apologies, negative publicity and public backlash, as well as expensive lawsuits against the Tennessee Highway Patrol officers and the City of Cookeville.

When Jim Osorio, then a law enforcement officer in Indianapolis, Indiana, heard about the story, he wanted to do something to prevent future tragedies. As a former animal control officer and long-time dog owner, Osorio knew how to handle strange dogs on the job, but he also knew that many of his fellow officers didn't have the same training and background as he did. He became passionate about creating a program that could help deputies determine whether a dog is dangerous, show deputies how to defend themselves from an aggressive dog and give deputies tools that can be used as alternatives to shooting.

"Officers going through basic training don't learn anything about how to handle animals, even though situations where there are animals around come up on the street all the time," Osorio said. "Animal control is not always around, and they don't go to every call a police officer might go to, so officers need this training."

In January, his 8-hour class, Defensive Tactics - Canine Encounters, was given a general course reporting number (62040) by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE). There are currently classes scheduled with the Austin Police Department, the Parker County Sheriff's Office, the Greenwood Police Department in South Carolina and the Arizona Peace Officer Standards & Training Board, among other agencies, but any law enforcement depart-

ment can host the training for a nominal fee.

The class covers topics such as how to prevent a dog attack, contributing factors in a dog bite, types of dog aggression, dog body languages, risk assessment, how to approach a dog, report writing, five levels of use of force effective against dogs, how to effectively use non-lethal tools deputies already carry on dogs, and "hand to paw" combat.

Osorio's own six-year-old German Shepherd, Coral, assists in the training.

"Mostly Coral's job is public relations. She makes her rounds to everybody," Osorio said. "That helps. I had a police officer that was terrified of dogs and in the beginning of the course and he actually barricaded himself in because he was so uncomfortable with dogs. By the end, he was playing with her."

The goal of the class is to decrease the number of unnecessary dog shootings while increasing the safety of law enforcement officers and the public.



"There are a lot of officers who fear dogs and have never been offered training. No one has told them anything different than 'just shoot the dog if he's a threat,'" Osorio said. "Nowadays with social media, that's a big liability. People are suing because police officers are shooting their dogs. And with any shooting, accidents can happen. Moving targets are hard to shoot. An animal is continuously moving and if you shoot, you are responsible for that bullet. There are officers that have fired at a dog, missed, and the bullet hit another officer or a civilian."

Dog shootings have gotten more expensive and more controversial. A jury in Frederick County, Maryland, awarded one dog owner \$607,500 in 2012 after his Labrador was killed by a sheriff's deputy while the deputy was attempting to serve a civil warrant on the owner's son. In Austin, a "Justice for Cisco" Facebook page rendered more than 100,000 "likes" in 2012 after police officers shot a family pet after going to the wrong address while responding to a domestic disturbance complaint. And a dog shooting incident in Fort Worth in 2012 lead Sen. Wendy Davis to file SB 1358, which would have required all Texas law enforcement agencies to send peace officers to aggressive dog training. Though that bill died in committee, a similar bill did become law in Colorado.

"More and more these days, people consider their pets to be family. The outcry over a dog shooting can really tax police and sheriff's departments," Osorio said, adding that about one-third of American households have at least one dog. "It doesn't matter if officers are responding to a complaint about a loud stereo, or a domestic dispute. There pretty much could be a dog in that house, so they need to be aware of it and what the dog's attitude is. ... This is my number one goal right now, is to teach this course."

More information about the course can be found at www.canine-encounters.com.