

Pickens' first K-9 unit on the scent

"We bonded immediately," said Officer Brandi Strawn of the one-year-old black German Shepherd, "Blecky," the Pickens County Sheriff's first permanent K-9 drug dog.

After just over two weeks of training at the Titusville Police Department in Florida, Blecky and Strawn returned nationally certified to perform drug searches, patrol/apprehension and tracking. The deputy-dog team is now on the clock full-time in Pickens County.

Blecky will assist officers in a variety of areas including suspect search, missing person searches, handler protection and narcotics recovery. The pair will be a highly visible presence in the county, performing tasks from routine traffic stops to road block assistance to drug sweeps at area schools.

"Any [officer] at a traffic stop, I'll pull in behind them. If someone's pulled over, I have a right to run the dog. I'll be in the schools a lot, too. And all principals have access to me with any concerns they have. We will also be working with the fire department and the Anti-Drug Coalition. It's kind of like a big network. He'll be utilized a lot," Strawn said of Blecky. She and the dog are now on-call 24-hours a day.

Strawn, a self-proclaimed animal lover, said Blecky's most striking characteristics are "his amazing intelligence and how all this work he does is for a toy. I mean that's his whole motivation. That's what keeps him going. As soon as he finds the drugs or whatever he is looking for, I give him the toy, and he knows he did his job," she said. To maintain a close handler/K-9 bond, Blecky will live at Strawn's residence along with her seven-year-old daughter and their three other pets.

"That's how you stay bound with a dog, you keep it with you at all times," she said. "My little girl and Blecky play hide-and-seek, but he's a tracking dog--he does really well."

Blecky has yet to make any real life busts or apprehensions, but Strawn said she and the K-9 were called for twice before they even returned from training in Florida.

Capt. Frank Reynolds said the new K-9 unit, which was fully funded by volunteer efforts and donations from the Pickens community, will give the sheriff's office its own vital resource and the ability to be self-reliant, "Because we won't need to call other agencies," Reynolds explained. "We will be able to serve the community better," he said. While funding for the K-9 unit came by way of fundraisers and donations, Reynolds emphasized Sheriff Donnie Craig's vital role in the project, a campaign promise made real just four months after Craig's swearing-in ceremony last January.

"Sheriff Craig has tried to identify areas where the agency can improve upon and focused on the K-9 unit and animal control - both of which he will have accomplished in a very short period of time," Reynolds said. "Without Sheriff Craig's leadership and the support of the community, this project would not have occurred."

Reynolds also said Sheriff Craig is looking to add three more K-9 units to the county payroll in the future as funding can be made available.

Both Strawn, Reynolds and the Pickens County Sheriff's Office would like to thank Hinton Milling for donating all of Blecky's dog food and his kennel, Susan Crowe DVM for donating Blecky's ongoing medical care, Abba Dabba Dawg for offering ongoing grooming, as well as the long list of people who gave their money, time and resources to this project.