

A FRISKY HUNT

Where pricey search services fail, students missing furry friends turn to those who know them best

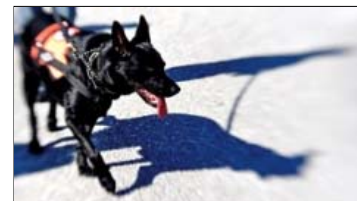
By Adele Hampton

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She was hot on the trail. Nose to the ground, Heidi wove through rows of stacked mail in the Glen Burnie post office warehouse. Nutmeg the cat was missing, and Heidi was on a mission to find her.

Heidi is a 2-year-old black German Shepherd and Labrador mix. Her owner and handler is Anne Wills, and the two are part of a team of highly trained dogs and handlers who specialize in finding missing pets.



Dogs Finding Dogs is a nonprofit organization that tracks and locates lost animals all over the mid-Atlantic. Wills started the group last August. Dogs and their handlers use the same tracking techniques used to train search and rescue teams and K-9 police forces.

At this university, when it comes to finding lost pets, students are often limited to posting fliers and spreading the word. Most pet locating services cost hundreds of dollars.

Senior anthropology major Anne Ramirez lost her cat Mohmoh in the College Park neighborhood of Hollywood three weeks ago. She said she thinks the cat snuck out the open kitchen door. After refusing to pay for a professional service, she turned to craigslist, where Wills found her.

"I saw her posting and contacted her about her situation," Wills said. "We talked and she told me how she was approached by another company but couldn't afford it. So, I explained to her that we were a non-profit and would come out for free."

Since then, Ramirez has been working with Wills and Heidi to find Mohmoh using the technique of powdering — laying down flour around designated spots where the animal has been to reveal footprints — to track the cat's whereabouts.

"I think they're great," she said. "I was looking at other pet trackers, and they charged hundreds of dollars. It's a great fallback if the traditional methods of finding your pet don't work. It gives people hope... to let students know that there are other resources."

Dogs Finding Dogs has seven teams and training centers in Maryland, Washington D.C., northern Virginia and southern Pennsylvania. Because of their limited means of transportation and funding, the organization tries its best to take on as many cases as their budget and time will allow. The group is technically non-profit, but they accept donations to pay for operation costs.

"The goal is to get the animal found," said Janel Fishpaw, another Dogs Finding Dogs trainer. "You're not going to get rich doing this and that's not really why we do it. We're really a tool to help find your pet."

Because the dog is trained in German, Wills uses the command, "Such!", the German order for "Track!," to start the search. Like most search and rescue K-9s, Heidi and the rest of the organization's dogs are trained in languages other than English, so they only listen to orders from their trainers, Fishpaw said.

Last Friday, Wills and Heidi traveled to Glen Burnie to track Nutmeg, a missing calico cat who climbed into the mail shoot of the Boston, Va., post office, mailing herself three hours away.

"You guys have no idea how much I miss this cat," said post office worker and Nutmeg's caretaker Dianne Brintley as she wiped away tears. "She doesn't know anybody here. She's all alone."

Brintley contacted Dogs Finding Dogs to track and find Nutmeg. And with Heidi's 80 percent success rate, the odds are good.

"Find the kitty," Wills said to Heidi, cueing the big black dog to put her nose to the ground and follow the scent of the nearby cat.


"We have a saying that goes, if Heidi can find just one animal, then she's done her good deed for the rest of her life," Fishpaw said. "And based on her record, she pretty much has enough good deeds to last her, and then some."

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