



WARRIOR FEATURES

K9s4COPs

The tragic story of a police K9 lost in the line of duty inspired the founding of an organization dedicated to improving the effectiveness of law enforcement and ensuring public safety.

By Steven M. Brown



PHOTO BY THOMAS B. SHEA



► Harris County Precinct 4 Deputy Ted Dahlin lost his K9 partner Blek in the line of duty on Dec. 22, 2009. The tragic event became the inspiration for the nonprofit K9s4COPs organization.



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K9s4COPs.org

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► K9 Blek anxiously awaits some toss-and-catch with Deputy Ted Dahlin. Blek was killed while tracking a burglary suspect in 2009.

◀ Harris County Precinct 4 Deputy James Glaze and his K9 partner Cir participated in the 2013 Texas K9 Officers Conference & Trials, sponsored by K9s4COPs.



PHOTO COURTESY TED DAHLIN

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arris County Precinct 4 Deputy Ted Dahlin spent more than three years building up an intense level of trust with his partner.

The two had gone through rigorous training together, and out on patrol, Dahlin was secure in the knowledge that his partner would lay down his life to protect Dahlin's if necessary, without question and without hesitation.

That's what partners do—particularly, partners of the four-legged variety.

"When you're on an eight- or 10-hour shift and you're subject to call out 24/7, you spend a lot of time with your dog," Dahlin said. "Once they've found that first or second bad guy who could have killed you if he wanted to, you learn to trust your K9."

In the late afternoon hours of Dec. 22, 2009, Dahlin and his K9 partner, a 5-year-old Czech-German shepherd named Blek, responded to a burglary call. It was the last call Dahlin and Blek would ever work together. Two burglary suspects, surprised by the arrival of uniformed officers, had fled into a wooded area of north Houston. Blek went in after them, just as he was trained to do, but he didn't come out.

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One of the burglary suspects, a 17-year-old named Cornelius Harrell, strangled Blek to death. Dahlin had lost his partner and his friend.

"That night was very hard," Dahlin remembers. "I spent more time with Blek than I did my family. When I lost him, it kind of took the wind out of my sails."

"Really, all I wanted after that night was to see something good come from that horrible incident."

And in fact, something good would come from it.

Learning of Dahlin's loss and Blek's sacrifice while watching the evening news, Houston-area philanthropist and animal lover Kristi Schiller was moved to act. She called a local politician she knew and inquired about donating a new K9 to the Harris County Precinct 4 Constable's

Office. Her generous request was met with little more than questions and bureaucratic red tape.

"I quickly found it wasn't as easy to donate a dog as I thought it would be," Schiller says.

Next, Schiller took to the Internet in search of some sort of charitable organization that could cut through the red tape and help her fulfill her wish of donating a K9. Again, she came up empty, but she did learn through her Internet search that more than a dozen law enforcement agencies, just in her home state of Texas, were in the process of trying to acquire K9s. She also learned that a trained K9 carried an initial price tag of between \$10,000 and \$15,000, and that K9 unit budgets were often the first casualty of rough economic times within a police department.

"I saw a need that wasn't being fulfilled and decided that I needed to do something to help. I decided that this was my calling," Schiller says. "I called our lawyer and said I wanted to start a charity."

In June 2010, Schiller founded K9s4COPs with the mission of raising charitable funds to acquire and donate trained K9s to law enforcement agencies in need. On March 27, 2011, the

PHOTO COURTESY K9S4COPs



▲ Kristi Schiller founded K9s4COPs in 2010 with a mission of purchasing trained K9s for deserving law enforcement agencies.

► Harris County Sheriff's Office Deputy John Walker handles his K9 Gorbi as Gorbi hits the decoy hard.



PHOTO BY THOMAS B. SHEA

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"We don't want money to ever be an issue getting in the way of an officer having a K9 and performing the work they do in the community."

▼ Decoys, clad in protective bite suits, serve an unenviable but valuable purpose in K9 training and competition.



organization received its 501 (c)(3) non-profit status, and less than a month later, K9s4COPs made its first donation to the Harris County (Texas) Sheriff's Department: four K9s named Boomer, Fozzie, Mikey and Tamara.

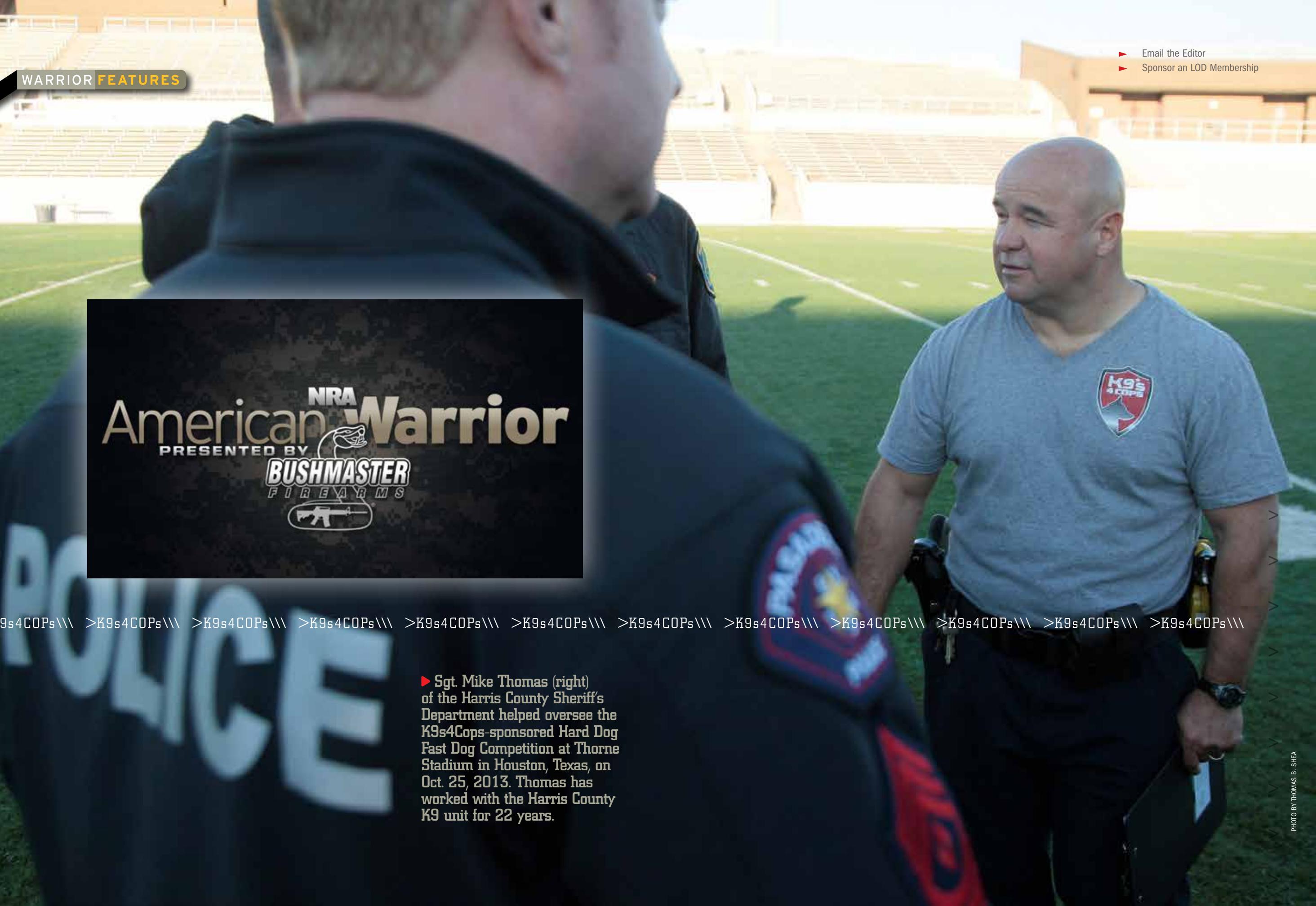
Since then, K9s4COPs has grown exponentially. In 2011, the organization donated 10 K9s to two agencies in Texas. In 2012, the tally was 13 K9s to nine agencies in three states. So far this year, K9s4COPs has gifted 19 K9s to 15 agencies in seven different states, and in just over two years since its inception has raised more than \$2 million to support the cause.

"We're filling a gap that counties and districts often can't fill," said K9s4COPs Executive Director Liz Lara-Carreno. "We don't want money to ever be an issue getting in the way of an officer having a K9 and performing the work they do in the community."

The Harris County Sheriff's Department, recipient of K9s4COPs' first-ever gift, has since received 16 K9s from the organization, bringing the department K9 unit's roster to 23 K9s.

Sgt. Mike Thomas has been with the Harris County Sheriff's Department since 1985 and has spent the last 22 years working with the K9 unit. He's worked his way from the bottom up—starting out as a bite-suit-wearing decoy during K9 training sessions and now serving as day-shift sergeant as well as training sergeant—and he's seen the unit grow. Thanks to K9s4COPs, he says, the department's K9 unit has almost tripled in size in the time he's worked there.

The addition of all those well-trained dogs



► Sgt. Mike Thomas (right) of the Harris County Sheriff's Department helped oversee the K9s4Cops-sponsored Hard Dog Fast Dog Competition at Thorne Stadium in Houston, Texas, on Oct. 25, 2013. Thomas has worked with the Harris County K9 unit for 22 years.

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has benefitted not only the department and the officers they patrol with. More importantly, it's benefitted the community as a whole—and the benefit is quantifiable.

"Those 16 dogs that K9s4COPS have donated have improved the quality of life for the citizens of Harris County," he says. "You think about the felony suspects they've taken off the streets, the dope they've taken off the streets. One of our dogs in the last year has taken \$6 million dollars worth of drugs off the street, and I have several that have taken over \$4 million."

Deputies Alex Chapa and Daniel Kerrigan are two of the Harris County Sheriff's Department officers who have benefitted from the generosity of K9s4COPs. Both took a trip with Sgt. Thomas and other deputies to a kennel several states away to select their donated K9 partners.

"One of our dogs in the last year has taken \$6 million dollars worth of drugs off the street, and I have several that have taken over \$4 million."

“He was probably the smallest dog I saw, but he had the biggest attitude out of all of them. He was everything I wanted: a small dog with a crazy motor.”

Both deputies agree that the K9 partners they've received through the generosity of K9s4COPs are helping them perform their duties better and more confidently.

“At the sheriff's office, we don't have two-man units, so this is the best you could ask for,” Chapa said. “You always have someone there that has your back. If somebody's trying to fight me or hurt me, I've always got Rocco there to have my back. I've got my own support 24/7.”



PHOTOS BY THOMAS B. SHEA

▲ Harris County Sheriff's Department Deputy Alex Chapa's K9 Rocco (below) posted a 31 mph run to win the title of Fast Dog at Thorne Stadium in Houston, Texas.



► Harris County Sheriff's Department Deputy Daniel Kerrigan and his K9 partner Bailey won the Hard Dog Competition at the K9s4COPs-sponsored Hard Dog Fast Dog competition.



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Kerrigan learned very early on in his career with the K9 unit that the sense of security Chapa describes can turn very real.

Just out of K9 school, Kerrigan and Bailey saw their first real-world deployment when they were called with other officers to respond to a home invasion. Gunfire was exchanged, and the armed suspect fled into a wooded area. After a good deal of searching through the brush, Kerrigan and his dog located the suspect, who turned his gun on Kerrigan. That's when Kerrigan's K9 partner went into action, bursting toward the armed suspect, hitting him hard in the arm and knocking the gun loose. The suspect was taken into custody, and Kerrigan and his K9 lived to serve another day.

Now having served with K9 Bailey for two years, Kerrigan has developed a keen appreciation for the abilities of these brave service dogs. They are valuable partners in the war on crime.

"Since I became a K9 handler, my ability to catch suspects is probably two or three times what it was before. And that's just one handler," he says. "Our K9 unit has more than doubled in size in the two years I've

"If somebody's trying to fight me or hurt me, I've always got Rocco there to have my back."

enforcement in the area of training. This past October, K9s4COPs hosted its first Texas K9 Officers Conference and Trials in Houston, bringing in subject matter experts from around the U.S. to share knowledge with the 75 K9 officers who attended. The officers were able to learn new techniques and gain valuable TCLEOSE (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education) certification hours. This inaugural conference was such a success that plans are already being made for a larger conference in 2014.



- On the 2013 conference's final day, 30 K9/handler teams had the opportunity to let off a little steam and put their abilities on display at the Hard Dog Fast Dog Competition at Thorne Stadium in Houston. K9 competitors were put to the test and judged on the power and strength with which they could hit a bite-suit-clad decoy (Hard Dog) and how fast they could run (Fast Dog).

Fittingly, it was two well-trained K9s4COPs-donated dogs from the Harris County Sheriff's Department that took home top honors in the competition. Alex Chapa's partner Rocco posted a 31 mph sprint time to win Fast Dog, and Daniel Kerrigan's partner Bailey finished off a dead run by putting a ferocious hit on a decoy to take Hard Dog honors.

While the event was a lot of fun for the participants and for members of the public who gathered to cheer on the competitors, Chapa noted that the K9s4COPs Hard Dog Fast Dog Competition provided more than just entertainment value.

"Basically, we were competing in what we do," he said. "You know, we don't really get graded on the job. They just tell you, 'Hey good job' or, 'hey you caught the bad guy.' Getting to see the other dogs work and getting to meet other handlers from all over Texas gave me something to work on moving forward."

Standing with K9s4COPs founder Kristi Schiller and receiving their Hard Dog and Fast Dog awards at midfield of Thorne Stadium, Kerrigan and Chapa were able to reflect on the real value of Schiller's young organization—both to themselves personally and to the community at large.

"I know for sure if it wasn't for K9s4COPs, I wouldn't be where I am," Chapa noted. "Our K9 unit wouldn't be as strong as it is."

"It's really cool that we get to work with dogs," Kerrigan said. "But when you break it down to what it's really accomplishing, it's a lot bigger than just more cops with dogs. It's safer people."

"While I've benefitted from having the K9 they donated," he said. "I think our community has benefitted even more—the good guys in the community, anyway." **AW**



► Kristi Schiller is applying the K9s4COPs model to a new initiative called K9s4KIDs, the goal of which is to place specially trained K9s with school resource officers and campus police departments.

K9s4KIDs

Just as Kristi Schiller was inspired to found K9s4COPs by the story of K9 Blek's heroism, she has also been moved to action by the horrific school shootings at places like Columbine High School in Colorado and Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut.

Schiller has recently started a new initiative called K9s4KIDS under the K9s4COPs nonprofit umbrella. The K9s4KIDS mission is very similar to that of its parent organization: to provide trained K9s, free of charge, to school district resource officers or campus police departments in need.

"After the tragic incidents that have occurred in our schools the last few years, I started thinking about how I could help," Schiller said. "Having a dog in school could act as a deterrent for an active shooter or for a student bringing illegal drugs into school. Having an omnipresent a K9 with specialized training could provide a sense of safety and security for the students."