

NO ORDINARY POOCH

Newest member of the Fire Department has four legs and a nose for finding arson

BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

Winston-Salem's newest fire investigator has a nose for finding out if arson is the cause of a blaze. His name is Shazam, and he is a black Labrador Retriever.

Shazam is an accelerant canine, or arson dog, who can sniff out chemicals used to start fires like gasoline, kerosene and paint thinner. His skills will help the Winston-Salem Fire Department at the sites of suspicious fires.

"These dogs can go through a fire scene and identify those fuels that are used...they can identify and smell that much quicker than we can," said Assistant Fire Marshal Matt Guffey, Shazam's handler. "It's always a good resource to have."

Guffey has been investigating fires for years and said that few fire departments in the state have arson dogs. Before Shazam went on duty in September, fire investigators would have to borrow an arson dog from the SBI, which could take up to four hours to get to a scene.

Shazam was provided to the fire department by the State Farm Insurance Arson Dog Program. The program trains 10 dogs a year and has placed over 200 arson dogs with fire departments across the country. State Farm, the nation's largest homeowners insurer, paid for the dog and its training. The training, which is conducted in New England at Maine Speciality Dogs, takes a month for both handler and dog. When a fire claim is filed, State Farm investigates the fire so often the company works hand-in-hand with fire departments.

"State Farm feels this is a valuable tool in helping to fight arson, fight fraud, it also provides another great way to partner with fire departments across the country, it's just part of our overall effort to be a good corporate citizen," said State Farm's Danny Sheppard.

Shazam will regularly be on the scene at fires that officials believe were intentionally set and at those involving large financial losses. But he will have little down time. To initiate him, Guffey plans to take the dog to as many fire scenes as possible. It's good practice for the dog. And since arson dogs are fed by hand as they work, Shazam will get his fill as has he 'bones up' on his skills.

The dog's feeding happens like this: Once the pair arrive at a fire scene, Guffey straps on a pouch filled with dog food as Shazam gets ready to go to work. The dog will sniff around and stop when it sniffs an accelerant and sit, at which point Guffey feeds him.

But Guffey can't always depend on fires for Shazam's feeding time.

"When we got back (from training), we didn't have a single house fire for three weeks, which is uncommon in Winston," said Guffey.

When this happens Guffey sets up a series of cans filled with various materials found after house fires, such as sheet rock and cardboard. In one can he puts a cotton ball with just a little bit of accelerant on it. When Shazam finds the accelerant, he gets his treats just like he would at a real fire.

But there's been plenty of real fires in the past couple weeks where Shazam has found accelerants. Once the dog sniffs it out, the accelerant-laced material is sent to the SBI for analysis.

Arsons aren't uncommon in Winston, says Guffey. He's seen people set fire to their homes and cars for various reasons, including attempts to get insurance money and during domestic disputes. There are also those who get a thrill at seeing things burn.

"With the economy going down hill, we're starting to see more fraud cases," said Guffey. "As gas prices go up, you'll see the big SUVs getting burned."

Guffey drives Shazam around in a truck that's specially designed for them, complete with a special "back-seat" for Shazam and compartments for all the equipment Guffey needs. When off-duty, Shazam goes where Guffey goes. The dog lounges around Guffey's office at the Public Safety Center and goes home with him at night.



Photo by Todd Luck
Matt Guffey with his partner in crime-fighting, Shazam, a black Labrador Retriever.



Danny Sheppard

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Film

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behind the acclaimed documentary, "Wordplay," is the film's director and co-writer.

"Part of RiverRun's mission is to present films that help provide a perspective on the world we live in and the challenges we face," said RiverRun Executive Director Andrew Rodgers. "With the economy on the top of everyone's minds and the Presidential contest reaching a fever pitch, we thought this was the perfect time to bring back one of the best-received films from our 2008 festival for a free encore and host an open and nonpartisan discussion about fiscal responsibility."

The post film discussion will be led by Phil Smith, the national political director for the nonpartisan Concord Coalition. He will talk about fiscal responsibility and the national debt, and how the government's actions could impact our wallets for years to come.

The next festival will be



Rodgers

held April 22-27, 2009 in Winston-Salem. Visit www.riverrunfilm.com for more information.

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