



California firefighter Rob Cima shares a moment with his Golden Retriever Harley at Ground Zero. Harley was one of the Foundation's three "pilot" dogs.

National Disaster Search Dog Foundation

When California firefighters Rob Cima, Randy Gross and Rick Lee partnered with Golden Retrievers Harley, Dusty and Ana from the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation (NDSDF), they knew the dogs would be an excellent resource for their department. They never imagined that four years later they would be taking their dogs into the worst disaster scene in US history.

Ana, Dusty and Harley were the "pilot" dogs from the NDSDF, the first three canines fully trained by the Foundation for urban disaster-search work. Their canine graduates are among the most highly trained in the nation and are relied upon for providing first-responder disaster-search services to communities across the nation.

When disaster struck New York on September 11, 13 NDSDF teams were deployed to the World Trade Center as members of FEMA task forces. All but one of those teams were FEMA Advanced Certified. Not bad for a service organization still in its infancy.

NDSDF began in 1995 as a seed of hope after the Oklahoma City bombing. Wilma Melville, a retired physical education teacher, and her black Labrador Retriever Murphy, a FEMA-certified

Advanced Disaster Search dog, were deployed to Oklahoma City to help search for victims at the disaster site. Melville witnessed how few certified disaster-search dogs were available to help locate live victims in the building rubble. Dismayed at that reality, Melville embarked on a personal mission to create a training program that would train more handlers, train them faster and train them more cost-effectively.

Until that time, all disaster-search dogs certified in the US were trained and handled by civilian volunteers at a personal cost of up to \$15,000. Training to the advanced certification level took three to five years, with little professional help available to the handler. Dropout and failure rates were high.

Melville had trained Murphy with the help of professional gun-dog trainer Pluis Davern, owner of Sundowners Kennels in Gilroy, California. "My experience with Pluis taught me that three ingredients were paramount," Melville said. "A good dog, a good handler and professional training for both." With that guiding philosophy, Melville and Davern worked together once again, and the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation was born.

