

Having a blast

Rocko - Oakland County's first bomb sniffing dog - arrives

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Compared to her previous jobs with the Oakland County Sheriff's Department, Sherry Locher's new assignment is almost a snap.

You might say she's having a blast - except for the poor choice of words. Locher is the handler for Rocko, Oakland's first ever bomb sniffing dog. And a blast is what the dog and Locher are trained to avoid.

Sheriff Michael J. Bouchard decided to add a bomb dog to the county's K-9 corp earlier this year after the shootings at Columbine High School sparked a host of false alarms at local schools.

Oakland had already reinstated the K-9 corps with four dogs and handlers for tracking people or drugs. But after a rash of bomb threats (29 from April until the last day of school in June), the sheriff decided to add a dog trained exclusively to detect explosives... and react in a passive manner.

"I guess it's a sign of the times," sniffs John S. Skalski, chief trainer at the Oakland Police Academy at the Auburn Hills Campus of Oakland Community College. "But there's a big call for dogs that can quickly scan a building or an area."

Sheriff Robert J. Pickell of Genesee County, one of the first departments to have a bomb dog, said he realized their potential after seeing one sniff out pistol that had been buried in a field. "If I hadn't seen it, I never would have believe it was possible," he said.

Skalski said a dog's sense of smell is believed to be 40 to 60 times more sensitive than a human's. "They can do some unbelievable things," he said.

Last week Locher and Rocko underwent the first of five weeks of training - time Skalski said was devoted largely to bonding and agility. "The dog and handler must work very closely together," he said. "So they have to understand each other."

Locher joined the sheriff's department as a civilian clerical employee shortly after graduating from Waterford Mott High School in 1986. After a stint as a corrections (jail) officer, Locher became the first woman drill instructor at the sheriff's newly opened boot camp - subsequently named after the late John F. Nichols.

Being the lone female DI at the very macho Camp Nichols was an experience, Locher

acknowledged. But the biggest challenge was psychological, she said. "Helping trainees realize they are worth more than they thought they were."

After boot camp, Locher was assigned to road patrol - a nuts and bolts assignment for most deputies. "That's an experience," she said, one easily as dangerous as anything she's likely to encounter with the bomb dog.

Rocko and other bomb dogs are trained to detect 16 basic scents present in most explosives, said Locher. "When he does detect one of those scents, the dog sits immediately," she said, and Locher calls the bomb squad.

Locher is no stranger to animals. She and her husband Don, a 1979 graduate of Waterford Kettering High School, own another German Shepherd on their 10-acre home in White Lake Township. They also have three children, Brock, 12, Paige, 7, and Pierce, 3.

Locher sometimes refers to her husband as "the civilian," in deference to his being a tool and die



Avoid: Sherry Locher and Rocko are trained to avoid blasts, of the bomb sort. The dog is trained to detect 16 scents present in most explosives.

maker. "He's very supportive of avoid talking shop," my career," she said, "but we



On board: A rash of bomb threats in 1999 prompted the county Sheriff Department to hire Rocko as a bomb sniffing dog. The expert's handler is Sherry Locher.

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