

By Jen Reeder

# K-9 from Ukraine

***Lab rescued from Ukraine finds new life as Narcotics Detection Dog in Florida.***

**A**s Russian forces shelled Ukraine, a chocolate Lab named Bruno faced an uncertain future. His family had to flee, and they couldn't take their dog with them. They were forced to put him up for adoption.

Fortunately, rescuers transported Bruno to Germany, where he entered a police dog training program – right around the time Detective Harrison Williams of the Fort Myers Police Department in Florida was hoping to partner with a narcotics detection K-9.

It was meant to be.

On May 26, 2022, the detective drove from Fort Myers to Miami to pick up Bruno from the airport after his international flight to America – and they immediately hit it off.

“It took about two hours to get him through U.S. Customs,” Williams recalls. “Then when I got to him, we had an instant bond. I got him out of the crate, put his leash on, and he put one paw over my right shoulder, his other paw over my left shoulder, and kind of gave me a hug.”

The bond has only grown stronger since then. Bruno completed more than 200 hours of positive reinforcement training with his handler to become a



Detective Harrison Williams and Bruno.



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nationally accredited narcotics detection dog. The Lab can alert on a variety of narcotics, including heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine – both powder and crack cocaine.

“He can detect the lightest odor,” Williams explains. “Even if somebody touched the door handle with narcotics on their hand, Bruno can alert to that door area and let me know that he can smell the narcotics.”

The team works in the gang unit, and Bruno has made some important busts that led to prison time for documented gang members. For instance, at a traffic stop last year, Bruno performed a “free air sniff” of a vehicle and detected narcotics. When police officers searched the car’s occupants, they discovered both men possessed illegal firearms.

“Typically guns and drugs go hand in hand,” he says. “Essentially, Bruno was a major key component in sending these guys to prison.”

The Lab recently alerted on the right-hand passenger door of a car during a traffic stop. Sure enough, the passenger on the right side had hidden crack cocaine in his shoe.

Bruno also works in drug detection at a post office, schools, homeless shelters, and recovery centers as needed. When he alerts on the odor of a narcotic, his entire body language changes. His focus is unbreakable.

He works hard because of the reward for a find: praise from Williams and playtime with his favorite tug toy.

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Bruno seems to enjoy his work with Williams. In the police car, he often rests his head on the detective’s shoulder. When he hears Williams talking on the radio and starting to drive fast to catch a fleeing suspect, the Lab knows to lie down for a chase.

“He gets excited,” Williams says. “Here we go!”

**B**runo loves his home life, too. He has his own room in the four-bedroom house Williams shares with his wife and their two pet dogs, Mia and Maddie. The Lab is fast friends with the Catahoula Leopard dogs and has fun playing fetch in the yard with Williams.

In fact, Bruno seems to love everything about his new life in America except the Fourth of July. Explosions, fireworks, and gunshots upset him: His hair stands up, he acts distraught, and he gets gassy.

“He’s definitely been through some things. I can only assume from the things that he’s seen in Ukraine,” Williams says, adding that he’s working with a veterinarian to address the issue.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine isn’t the only crisis Bruno has survived. Hurricane Ian made landfall just outside Fort Myers on September 28, 2022. As a first responder, Detective Williams got an emergency activation notice two days before the devastating storm hit.

He boarded up his house and gathered Bruno’s crate, blankets, and two weeks of food. Sure enough – the next day they got called in for rapid deployment.

“Tuesday I went to work not knowing if I’d have a home to come back to or when we would be going home,” he recalls. “Bruno and I worked for eleven days straight,





Bruno ready for a day on the job.



Bruno and the gang unit.

helping get things back in order around the city. Bruno brought a lot of joy to people that lost everything.”

The Lab also offered stress relief to exhausted first responders. “I had requests from the captains and all the higher-ups to bring Bruno into dispatch: ‘Dispatchers are tired. They’ve been running calls for service left and right. Can you bring Bruno up and put a smile on their face?’ I’d say, ‘Absolutely – we’ll be up there in a little bit.’”

Whether working through Hurricane Ian, educating schoolchildren about police dogs, or searching for illegal narcotics to put criminals behind bars, Williams is grateful for the opportunity to work with K-9 Bruno.

“Honestly, Bruno is just my best friend,” he says. “Essentially I take my pet to work with me every day, and he helps me get guns and drugs off the street.”

Their teamwork has proven incredibly valuable to the Fort Myers Police Department, according to Sergeant Jari Sanders, who supervises the K-9 unit.

“It’s no secret that there is a serious opioid epidemic in our country. Illegal drugs like fentanyl and heroin have become a major issue in every community,” he says. “And Bruno is directly responsible for seizures of heroin and cocaine – from some very violent offenders as well. So he’s keeping our streets safer by using his nose.”

Bruno is the first Lab to join the force; the five other drug detection K-9s are German shepherds. But he won’t be the last Lab because he’s impressed everyone in the unit, including the police department’s dog trainer.

“Our trainer said it was different because Bruno understood right away, and he’s so driven,” he says. “Labs have that drive to get that reward.”

The sergeant – who has a 10-year-old chocolate Lab named Dixie at home – feels pleased that soon a giant photo of Bruno and Detective Williams will adorn the side of a city bus as part of the department’s “True Blue” campaign to recruit more officers.

“Bruno’s clearly got the face for that,” he says with a laugh. “And Harrison has a great personality – very outgoing and always has a smile on his face. So it goes both ways. Bruno and Harrison are just impressive.” 🐾

For more information, visit: [www.fmpolice.com](http://www.fmpolice.com) or follow Bruno and the Fort Myers Police Department on Instagram at: @fmpolice.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed “crazy dog lady” after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at [www.JenReeder.com](http://www.JenReeder.com).