



Heroes Helping Heroes

*First Responder Therapy
Dogs offer stress relief
for firefighters.*

By Jen Reeder

*Birdie comforts a first responder at
the 2021 Caldor Fire in California.
It was active for 69 days and
consumed over 221,000 acres.*

The first time California firefighter Amber Henderson saw therapy dogs arrive at the base camp of an active wildfire, she thought it seemed a little ridiculous—even though she’s a dog lover.

Then she watched a tough crew captain with a “terrible” look on his

face walk by a dog.

“You could tell he was just miserable. He stopped at the dog. He got down on his knees with the dog and literally rolled around in the grass at base camp with this dog. When he stood up, he looked like a different person,” she recalls. “It was such an eye-opener for me.”

Now Henderson, a battalion chief who works in Employee Support Services for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), depends on volunteers from the nonprofit First Responder Therapy Dogs to help her support firefighters in critical incident stress management and at base camps for wildfires.

COURTESY LENA STRICKLING



Bringing smiles at a base camp

“My job actually is to be 911 for our own first responders,” she says. “I really enjoy the energy their dogs bring to a base camp. It’s pretty fun to watch—and makes my job much easier, too.”

HOMESICK HEROES

Over 30 therapy dogs in nine states visit wildfire base camps, fire stations, police departments, and emergency dispatch centers as volunteers with First Responder Therapy Dogs, a nonprofit based in Marin County, California.

Executive Director Heidi Carman founded the group in January 2021 after visiting firefighters with her

Golden Retriever, Kerith, at fire stations and base camps during the 2020 fire season. Whenever they visit, the mood completely changes.

“It happens every single time we go into any situation because their job is stressful on a good day,” she says. “Immediately there’s laughter and smiling and happiness. It’s palpable—you can just feel it.”

Some firefighters collect the dogs’ trading cards. Significant others follow the nonprofit’s Instagram to try to catch a glimpse of their loved one while gone for weeks battling fires.

Kerith has visited over 10,000



Top right, center, and bottom left: They may be tired, sweaty, and covered with soot, but these firefighters can’t help but smile when Kerith says hello.



TOP: COURTESY LENA STRICKLING; TOP RIGHT, CENTER & BOTTOM: COURTESY FIRST RESPONDER THERAPY DOGS



Ready for Action: Kerith, Takoda, and a trio of Labs are on call whenever disaster strikes.

first responders in just 2 1/2 years. Thousands of firefighters deploy for weeks at a time to battle big blazes, like California's 2021 Caldor Fire near Lake Tahoe.

When visiting one of the base camps, a firefighter walked to Kerith and told Carman, "My wife just had to put my dog down while I was here fighting this fire last week." Then he hugged Kerith, buried his head in the dog's fur and cried.

"It felt like a long time. Then he wiped his eyes, stood up, looked at me and said, 'Thank you,' and walked off," she recalls. "They're just gone from home so long. I hear so many stories, like a firefighter missed his baby's first steps because he was out at a fire. When I see them, they're always telling me about their dogs and that they miss their dogs so much. It's a rough life."

Kerith, 4, delights in meeting new

people. Carman and her family trained her as a puppy for Guide Dogs for the Blind, but the gregarious dog was too interested in greeting every single person they met. So she changed careers.

After becoming a registered therapy dog with the nonprofit Pet Partners, Kerith visited the emergency room at a local hospital and seemed drawn to the paramedics and firefighters who came in with patients.

"It was like love at first sight. The firefighters and Kerith were just in love with each other," Carman says. "They started asking me to visit their fire stations here in Marin. After a few months of doing that, we had the crazy California 2020 fire season, and we had a fire in Marin County. So I started taking her out to the base camp, and it was incredible. I saw this great need for more 'Keriths.' "

Now her goal is to have volunteers

for First Responder Therapy Dogs in all 50 states—enough to provide stress relief for every first responder in America.

"They all need it, and they all deserve it," she says.

BASE CAMP COMFORT

Lena Strickling, associate director for the nonprofit, started volunteering with her dog Birdie because she has so many friends who are firefighters—and because her 2-year-old sheepdog mix absolutely loves meeting new people.

They've visited many fire stations and base camps together.

"You pull up next to an engine and it has Birdie's trading card in the window. They have her sticker with her face on their helmets and things like that," she says. "It's really special to realize how important this program is to all of them."

One firefighter on the Caldor Fire took a photo smiling alongside Birdie and texted it to his wife. Later, the woman sent a private message on social media thanking Strickling. She said it was the first time she'd heard from her husband or seen him smile in weeks since he'd been deployed for so long.

Station visits are meaningful, too. A week after a police officer was killed on a call, Birdie visited six fire stations, two police stations, two communication centers, and a California Highway Patrol team in a single weekend. Birdie's goofy antics lightened the mood memorably at a dispatch center, where she was rolling around on the ground and sniffing out chips from under consoles. Later, a supervisor said it was the first time she'd heard them laugh or talk to each other since the tragedy.

"You have to take care of them or how are they supposed to take care of us? So I'm always happy to go out and make any kind of difference we can and brighten up their day," she says. "And Birdie loves it, too."

Chloe MacBean, a certified dog



Takoda is ideal for this kind of work because he's gigantic and loves people, a very comforting combination.



Birdie and Kerith ready to deploy

trainer who owns Lab & Leo Dog Training in Marin County, hoped her Leonberger, Takoda, would excel in obedience competitions. But with his friendly personality, therapy work with first responders proved to be a better fit.

"I realized really quickly that he had a knack for loving people," she says. "Takoda has been a huge hit because he's gigantic and loves people."

In one particularly memorable experience, Takoda visited firefighters participating in San Francisco's 9/11 Memorial Stair Climb, in which they climb 110 stories in full gear to honor the firefighters who deployed to the World Trade Center.

"You definitely felt the intensity of it all," she says.

There will likely be an increasing

need for First Responder Therapy Dogs visits not only as fire seasons intensify but as the role of firefighters continues to expand to include responding to *any* emergency, including medical emergencies, according to Dan Rotwein, a fire engineer and paramedic for California's San Rafael Fire Department.

Rotwein, who misses his own Golden Retriever, Charlie, when he's away, has lost track of how many times Kerith has visited the fire station.

"Sometimes we're gone for multiple days from our home, and having Kerith come is like a little piece of home coming to work," he says. "She's such a loving, personable dog that wants to be right next to you. She makes her rounds, and you can tell it lightens the mood. It brings people together," he says. "It makes a big difference." **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She's proud that her cousin Steve is a retired CAL FIRE firefighter.



Birdie posing as fire dog of the year

TOP LEFT: COURTESY CHLOE MACBEAN; TOP RIGHT & BOTTOM: COURTESY LENA STRICKLING

For more information, visit firstrespondertherapydogs.org.