

Partners to the end — K9 Officer Gene Votruba, Django retire

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When Gene Votruba and his wife Teresa moved to Crescent City more than 13 years ago, two of his childhood passions merged — law enforcement and dogs.

Now that he and his canine partner Django are retiring, Votruba shared his journey as a K9 officer for the Crescent City Police Department and what next lies ahead.

Asking Votruba about which came first — his passion for law enforcement or dogs — is similar to asking about the chicken and the egg.

“I remember when in fifth grade, we’d have big show-and-tell days with emergency responders at the fire hall with fire trucks, police cars,” Votruba recalled. “Yeah, fire trucks are great, but I can still picture the officer, don’t remember his name, but I remember his demeanor, how he conducted himself. But when allowed me to sit in the front seat of his patrol car, that sealed it. Then whenever I saw a cop after that growing up, yeah, that’s what I want to do.”

Votruba has also always enjoyed animals and dogs, almost never being without a pet dog in tow since he was little. But that infatuation reached a whole other plateau when he saw Crescent City's K9 force.

"When I've seen these dogs in action and what they're able to do, I knew that's what I wanted to do. When I first came on the department here, I had the fortune to work along side K9 Zeus. He was with Officer Mellow at the time. I got to see some of the amazing things he has done and I was like, 'Yeah, that's exactly what I wanted to do.'"

While waiting for a opening on the K9 crew, Votruba got a puppy, started training and raising it up as a security canine.

"Some friends of mine here in town have him now and he's been a great protection dog at their house," Votruba said.

His journey to K9 officer, however, was not a direct path. After high school, he joined the Air Force and worked as a "cable splicer" in telephone cable communications. The Air Force career took him to the Sacramento area, where he met Teresa and they've since been married 30 years. The two have three children, and at age 49, Votruba is looking forward to transitioning into his next role as grandfather of three grandchildren.

After 17 years in Sacramento, Gene and Teresa followed her brother in law when he took a position as correctional officer at Pelican Bay State Prison.

"We came out to visit and that's how we found Crescent City. We came to love it," he said.

While Gene tried to continue on in telecommunications, Teresa got job at the sheriff's department as dispatcher.

"I got to meet the deputies and it rekindled what I've always wanted to do," he said.

So he applied to Crescent City police, but was told by Chief Plaque he needed more experience, then come back and try again.

"How do I get experience in law enforcement?" Votruba said he remembered asking himself.

Then he saw his in as a correctional officer at Juvenile Hall with the Del Norte County Probation Department.

"It gave me some training in the law enforcement aspect of world. I was dealing with the same kids as the officers out there, learning law structure. But I also had to be a mentor, a counselor, and developed skills how to talk to people," Votruba said.

Then one day, 911 was called by accident by a control pod tech. "Sergeant Garret Scott checked up on us. He was like, 'Hey, are you going to put your application in again? We have a another opening?'"

With little convincing needed, the second time proved to be the charm for Votruba.

Later, when K9 Zeus retired, it opened up a spot, so Votruba applied, went through interview process and was hired by Chief Plaque.

“I’ve been in the K9 business ever since,” he said.

His first dog was Ares. But after a few years, Ares had to retire due to health issues.

“I still have him. He’s with my wife. Ares is an 11 year-old German shepherd, same as Django, just a different color. He still has issues with dysplasia. He’s managing but doesn’t have the stress of work every day. But he has gone blind. Old age got the better of him,” Votruba said.

So when Officer Kaine decided to retire, his K9 partner Django was young at the time and still had years of working life left in him. Votruba volunteered to be Django’s second partner.

“Django is an amazing dog who’s done some amazing things and I’m very, very proud of him,” Votruba said.

Django was four they partnered up. He’ll be six at the end of January.

“He still has a lot of life left in him, although he can act like a puppy at times. You can tell he’s pretty excited,” Votruba said.

Votruba explained that K9s are trained for suspect apprehension, handler protection, tracking and trailing. In addition, police also utilize the dogs for narcotics detection, so they’re trained to find methamphetamine, heroin, cocaine and marijuana. But first and foremost, Votruba said they train their dogs to be a part of the community.

“We try to make sure our dogs are very social. We take them to a lot of community-oriented events, like Boating Safety Day. I let the kids visit and of course he always steals the show,” he said. Django also visits schools and other meet-and-greet programs like Shop With a Hero.

“We try to do a lot of things that allows the community do things with the K9s, to help people understand that yeah, they might seem ferocious at times, but they’re big babies. They love to be loved like any other dog,” Votruba said.

In his tenure, Votruba said Django has found and helped take quite a bit of narcotics off the streets. And there were a couple times he had to utilize Django’s skills to apprehend suspects.

“He did his job very well. I always sit back and scrutinize myself, ‘What did I do wrong in those situations?’ Because we go through a lot of training continually. Every two weeks, Officer Anthony Lopez and I would go to Weaverville to work with the Meyer Police K9 Academy. We do scenarios, have a guy run around in the puffy bite suit and try to make it as real world as possible. It is totally different when you face the real world and your dog has to actually apply what he has been learning to actually take a suspect by his mouth and hold him there, while I get him in handcuffs and render the scene safe,” Votruba said.

“It definitely gets the blood pumping. Because you see your dog and get used to him all the time as that big, lovey fluff ball that wants to so much love, then all of a sudden, he has to turn on his Mr. Not-so-nice

Puppy.”

After some soul searching, Votruba decided to retire and move to Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, where he has some family that just retired and are moving there. Plus, the fact his wife’s best friend from high school lives there sealed the deal.

Votruba said that although Django has several more good years of service in him, the department decided it would be best if they retired together.

“They didn’t want to put him through the stress of another handler. It’s time consuming, the recertifying of being put with another handler. So with my retirement they decided for him to retire to me, so that he could be a happy dog, allowed to play. I just found out he loves to play in the snow, and where I’m going, there’s lots of snow,” he said.

“We’ve built such a bond. He’s with me 24/7. He’s with me at home. He sees me every day. Where I go, he goes. Except maybe when I go run errands and he stays at home in the crate, he’s by my side, he’s my hip attachment. He actually bonded to me a lot faster than I thought he would. He’s just been absolutely amazing. I’m glad the city allowed him to retire along with me,” Votruba said.

Votruba said Crescent City has no replacement yet for Django. K9 Kai remains on the force with Officer Lopez.

“Kai is youngest of our dogs and is becoming quite the rockstar,” Votruba said. “I am very grateful to city of Crescent City to give me the opportunity to shine and do something I’ve always wanted to do. And give me the tools to succeed at it. Like I told the City Council, take good care of my crew. They’re a great crew to work with, who love their job as much as I loved mine. Help them grow. I think we’ll continue to see amazing things from this group in the community. I wish them the best.”