

“Man’s best friends” bring love and support to Lewiston *K9 Assisted Critical Response Teams comfort survivors and their families*

by Valerie Marier

October 25, 2023 is a date that will never be forgotten in Lewiston. A single shooter killed 18 people and injured 13. The traumatized community sheltered-in-place for several days while ambulance and police sirens echoed through the empty streets of Maine’s second most populous city. Locals, if not the entire state of Maine, were overcome with disbelief, fear, anger and mental anguish.

Among the trauma and support counselors arriving immediately to offer comfort to families, first responders and the community-at-large, were two adorable goldendoodles named Sky and Campbell, members of a K9 Assisted Critical Response team specifically trained to navigate stress and trauma while also offering love, healing, comfort and the feeling of safety.

Their handler, Kimberly Brown, who has lived in Kennebunkport for 12 years, added, “A K9 ACR dog does not judge you, no matter what you are going through. They love you unconditionally and provide a bridge that starts the healing process.”

Sky and Campbell sat inside the entrance of Lewiston’s Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul on Sunday, October 29, as more than 1000 community members, families and victims arrived for a town vigil. Brown recalled, “A mother with two children walked over to me and said, ‘My kids can’t talk about the situation but their actions show how they really feel. They’re afraid to leave the house.’ But when the children spotted Sky and Campbell, they ran right over and started petting the dogs. You could literally see their anxiety and fear start to melt away. I asked if they would like to be escorted to their seats by the dogs. With big bright smiles, they both said YES!”

On another day, Brown took Sky and Campbell to one of the city shelters. She said, “A man there had been directly impacted by the tragedy. He was very distant and unsure of what to do, so he stood alone. I waited a few minutes, then approached him and asked if he liked dogs. He just looked at me with vacant eyes. Then I asked if he liked BIG dogs and his eyes lit up. Sky weighs 85 pounds and Campbell is over 100 pounds, so when he saw them, he got right down on the floor and started petting them. I could see the hardness of his face soften as the dogs snuggled close to him. With tears in his eyes, he looked at me with all sincerity and said, ‘Thank you so very much.’ I know it was the initial step toward healing his pain.”

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Photos above: Kimberly Brown with Campbell, the 100-pound goldendoodle who joined her “therapy team” several years ago. Pictured with Campbell in the photo on the right is Sky, who has been offering comfort and care for more than a decade. Courtesy photos

Kimberly Brown became involved in therapy dog work in upstate New York in 2010 when she was teaching students with disabilities. She said, "I learned about a program called READ (Reading Education Assistant Dog). I also had a new puppy named Campbell and decided to have my students help him become a READ dog. We have been working as a therapy and READ dog team for more than 11 years now. Since I moved to Kennebunkport a decade ago, we have volunteered at Kennebunk Elementary School, area nursing homes, and every winter we work at the Mayo Clinic in Phoenix, Arizona."

A new goldendoodle named Sky joined Brown's life in 2018. "She's been working as part of my therapy dog team since 2019, and two years ago Sky became certified in Assisted Critical Response," Brown said.

Becoming an ACR dog requires slightly different training than therapy dogs. Brown said, "We are deployed when an event occurs that requires the need of an ACR team – we never just show up. The dogs learn how to deal with stress and trauma. Additionally, we provide resources to families and victims about where to find additional help, and we continue to provide support on holidays and other times to let families and the community know we are there for them. Always."

Brown added that the qualifications for dogs entering the ACR program are quite specific: the dog needs to be comfortable in large crowds and it must be able to handle stress and work with different cultures and ethnicities.



Brown said, "They have to be able and comfortable to sit for long periods of time with victims or those who have experienced a traumatic event."

"It's important to know also that the handler goes through extensive training as well," Brown said. "I've learned how to watch my dogs' body language and know when they are overwhelmed or need a break. Taking care of our dogs in these situations is important. After all, the dogs are doing all the work here." (Apparently, one trauma-trained golden retriever named Oliver slept for two straight nights after visiting "as many locations as possible following the October 25 mass shooting.")

While working with her dogs in Lewiston, Brown noticed that there are few ACR teams in Maine. As she continues to help the community of Lewiston, she said, "My goal is to have more ACR teams here in our state so that when a crisis arises, local teams are ready and available. Going forward and giving back, I plan on becoming an instructor / team evaluator. I want people to reach out to me so that I can give them the information they need to become part of a certified therapy team." (Her contact information is below).

"Lewiston needs much support with each new day," Kimberly said. "We are now doing home visits with families who lost loved ones in the shootings. I cannot underestimate the power that Assisted Critical Response dogs have in helping those who have suffered a tragic experience. Even for those who initially refuse help or counseling, these wonderful caring dog help them take the first step in processing and dealing with their grief."

FMI about K9 Assisted Critical Response or to contact Kimberly Brown, email kimberly@kimberlyhelene.com, or visit www.kimberlyhelene.com or phone 518-527-9999.



Photo top right: Sky, an 85-pound goldendoodle, is part of Kimberly Brown's ACR team. Photo above: Sky (left) and Campbell (right) inside the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Lewiston, greeting people as they arrived for the community vigil on Sunday, October 29, four days after the mass shooting in which 18 people were killed and 13 injured. This was the first vigil held in honor of those who had lost their lives. Photos by Kimberly Brown