

## **A Labrador of Love Lost**

*By Heather Gaghan*



*Jon-Jon*

*Photo Credit: The Record-Courier, Shannon Litz photographer.*

In the early hours of Friday, February 3<sup>rd</sup> of this year, Deputy Rick Koontz of the Douglas County, Nevada Sheriff's Office and his K-9 partner of four years—a soon to be five year old black Labrador named Jon-Jon, responded to assist another officer on an intrusion alarm in a local business park area. Jon-Jon remained in the patrol car while Deputy Koontz, the other officer and his patrol canine searched the facility. After 20 minutes they returned to their cars to find Deputy Koontz's car engulfed in flames. Rick tried desperately to free Jon-Jon from the car, but found the intense heat had melted the door handles. "I ran out and tried to open the door. I opened my baton and tried beating out the windows. My guns and backup guns were exploding inside. I tried to get him, but I figured he had to be gone."

Fire officials later assured Koontz that Jon-Jon had surely succumbed to smoke inhalation before the fire spread throughout the vehicle. It was later surmised by fire investigators that the cause of the deadly blaze may have started with faulty electrical wiring for the siren installed after the car was built by the manufacturer.

A steady stream of support from family and fellow officers over the hours and days that followed the tragedy helped ease the sudden loss for the deputy and his family. Even members in the community felt compelled to share their condolences. The Koontz family including the deputy's wife and three sons considered Jon-Jon a member of the family as he lived with them everyday. It was this extra time spent together that made Rick feel he was closer to Jon-Jon than he ever could have been with a human partner. "Your [human] partner goes home after the shift. Jon-Jon lived with us. I probably spent more time with him than with my wife and kids."

Jon-Jon was also a revered part of the community as he made several trips to the local schools. Letters from saddened students lined the walls at the Judicial and Law Enforcement Center. Koontz recalled that Jon-Jon loved going out the school and knew the schoolchildren would say "Oh no!" when they heard about his passing.

Jon-Jon and his role as a K-9 officer, made such an impact in the community that the local council of the Knights of Columbus hosted a Bingo Night with all the proceeds going towards a new partner for Koontz. The people of Douglas County realize that the K-9 unit of their police force is responsible for a large amount of arrests and keeping their streets safe.

The process of finding and training a dog for law enforcement is a long one and Rick remembers it all with Jon-Jon. Originally named Winsome Jon as a puppy born in Nebraska in 2001 and raised in

Modesto, California, this black Labrador was a natural for narcotic detection. It took only 12 hours of training for Jon-Jon to fully recognize each of the five odors: methamphetamines, cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and opium. After five additional weeks of law enforcement training and living together in a motel room, Jon-Jon was certified through the California Narcotics Canine Association (CNCA). The two new partners then returned home to Nevada and enjoyed training, living, and working together.



*Jon-Jon with Deputy Rick Koontz and Douglas County Sheriff Ron Pierini after an October 2002 drug bust.  
Photo Credit: The Record-Courier, Shannon Litz photographer.*

“Jon-Jon was a high drive dog that was either sleeping or [going] 100 miles an hour. He loved to run and was not particularly fond of cats. If he saw one, the chase was on.” Rick remembers his K-9 partner as being one of the greatest narcotic detection dogs of his time as he was credited with well over 400 finds that led to arrests or seizures; and also a regular dog that enjoyed being with his family and chasing his toys. “He had his little idiosyncrasies. He was a little knucklehead [who] loved you and licked you. He was truly awesome at what he did.” His vet even referred to Jon-Jon as the “poster child of black Labs” as he was in top physical shape through his constant drive to play and please Rick.

Koontz made sure that Jon-Jon's remains would be kept with him so he could honor his partner as he deserved with a plaque and badge made for his beloved K-9. "So when my grandkids ask, they will know. 'That was your grandpa's partner.'"



*Law enforcement officers formed a 2-mile long, 100 vehicle motorcade.  
Photo Credit: The Record-Courier, Shannon Litz photographer.*

On Friday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, just three weeks after that horrific morning, officers formed a 100 vehicle motorcade that stretched two miles long passing lines of people present to watch the motorcade pass and give their respects, while traveling to the Douglas County Fairgrounds where more than 600 people and 50 patrol dogs sat and stood elbow to elbow in the pavilion to bid a fond and grateful farewell to Jon-Jon. The memorial service attracted law enforcement personnel and K-9 officers from nearly every agency in Nevada, and from as far away as San Francisco and Idaho. The Sheriff's Office felt there really needed to be a special ceremony to truly honor Jon-Jon and his connection to so many.



*This was the first time the Sheriff's Office had lost a canine in the line of duty.  
Photo Credit: The Record-Courier, Shannon Litz photographer.*

An honor guard of dogs and their handlers lined up two by two on each side of the entrance to the pavilion at the fairgrounds, to form a path for the Koontz family. Bagpipes were played and Taps was delivered complete with an accompaniment of respectfully low yelps and barks. Sheriff Ron Pierini addressed the audience and shared tales of Jon-Jon's remarkable record of more than 400 narcotics finds and how that translates into real life, "He never received a paycheck. He never asked for benefits or special privileges."

Man's best friend is many things and unconditional is at the top of the list, as most of us are lucky enough to experience. For Deputy Rick Koontz, it was a black Labrador not even five years old who made not only home life but work a pleasure to be part of. "He was truly an awesome partner and friend. Anyone who ever got the opportunity to get to know Jon-Jon or watch him work, it was truly something special."

In the midst of this tragedy there is comfort knowing as Pastor Pete Nelson from Carson Valley United Methodist Church stated, "that

Jon-Jon is resting in arms that cradle him even more tenderly than Rick's through all eternity.”

With special thanks to The Record-Courier for their permission to use these images. For more coverage on Jon-Jon and to see the entire photo album, please go to their site at:

<http://www.recordcourier.com>