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Metro Transit Security K-9 Handler Gary Carney has been working with his partner Nitro, a 3-year-old chocolate Labrador retriever, for two years. Carney is one of three Transit Security officers who search daily for explosives on Metro's system.



A True Partnership: Metro K-9 Handler Gary Carney and Nitro

By JIMMY STROUP

(Nov. 6, 2007) The trunk of Gary Carney's car doesn't look like yours. No umbrella for inclement weather. No blanket for impromptu picnics. No Thomas Guide. His trunk is filled with dog treats, leashes and harnesses.

His trunk carries those items because his trunk is part of his office: his patrol car. Carney's a Metro Transit Security K-9 Handler and those are the tools that he and his partner – a 3-year-old chocolate Labrador retriever named Nitro – use to search for bombs on Metro's system each and every day.

Nitro rides in the converted backseat while Carney drives the Metro System. As a fully-trained "bomb-sniffing" dog, Nitro searches for suspicious packages at Carney's order.

"Our job is mostly to be searching for unattended packages," Carney said. "If we come across an unattended package and I work him on the package and he doesn't alert on it, I know it's nothing."

Far from where he started

Like a lot of transit employees, Carney's journey to the agency is an

Photos: Jimmy Stroup

odd one. He had originally applied for a job with the old Transit Police, but was aced out of the position when the force was decommissioned.

"At that time, when the old Transit Police disbanded, I was going through my background check, which is that last part of the process," he said. "I was really close to being finished when they disbanded."

Disappointed but determined, Carney took a job as a part-time bus operator, working for almost three years out of divisions in every part of Los Angeles, ending up mostly at Arthur Winston Division 5.

"If I had been full time, I would've stayed operating. Bus operator is a good position," he said. "I never had any problems with the work or the patrons, and I was good at it, I thought."

So when Metro Transit Security started taking applications, Carney "jumped at the opportunity" to try again for the kind of work he'd originally been after.

Acceptance and training

This time, his application made it all the way through. He was accepted into the Transit Security force and was trained as a K-9 handler. And his experience within the system as an operator was appreciated by his new managers there.

"It was easy for me when I started with Transit Security, since I already knew where everything was," he said. "I was already familiar with the bus divisions, the different routes and lines – all the different kinds of locations Metro has."

Carney and Nitro have been together for two years now. Their initial meeting was at a three-month course where Carney and Nitro participated in obedience exercises and explosives detection training.

"It was a heck of a lot of classroom work, actually; knowledge about explosives of all sorts. How to recognize the odors ourselves and not just rely on the dog," he said. "There are odors that the human nose can pick up, and you can differentiate between this or that."

'It's like a game'

Typically, explosives-searching dogs have a working life of five years, after which they usually retire to the home of their handlers. Labs can live as long as 15 years, so the majority of the dog's life could be in retirement.

Before he retires, though, to keep the dog as sharp and effective as possible, Nitro is housed in a kennel adjoining Carney's house; he's not



Carney directs Nitro to search buses, trains and stations for explosives, leaving no area un-sniffed. The search may be Carney's job, but Nitro enjoys the daily routine – which Carney said Nitro views as play time.

allowed in the house or even the garage. The Spartan lifestyle ensures that Nitro's usefulness remains peak until his retirement.

"You have to understand that work – for him – is like fun. For him, it's like a game," Carney said. "Labs are very playful and the play drive is what you look for when you're assessing a dog for this kind of work. You want them to want to go out and play. We've got him working but he thinks it's play time."

Once he stops being a work dog, Nitro will become just an ordinary dog at the Carney household. But in the meantime, the partners will spend their days along the vast system, constantly searching and staying very visible to Metro's patrons and employees

"We're out here dealing with the public, trying to assure them that they're safe in the system," he said. "I think the public and the employees want us out here. I'm constantly getting compliments about Nitro, about how good he looks, about how people are glad we're out working the system."

A useful deterrent

Carney said one of the most effective parts of having K-9 units patrolling the system – besides their ability to detect potentially dangerous devices – is the deterrent factor that seeing an officer equipped with a dog provides.

As for Carney, he feels that he's truly found his niche in this world. His love for animals is long-standing and has only grown because of his career as a K-9 handler. The animal-loving bug is apparently genetic, as well: Carney's daughter attends UC Davis on a scholarship and has plans for veterinary school.

And when Nitro is retired, Carney will train a new dog for the task of explosive detection on Metro's various lines, rail and bus.

"It's very important. It makes the Metro employees feel safe and lets the public know that we're out there in the system and out there for their benefit," he said. "I love it. I love being out here with my dog."