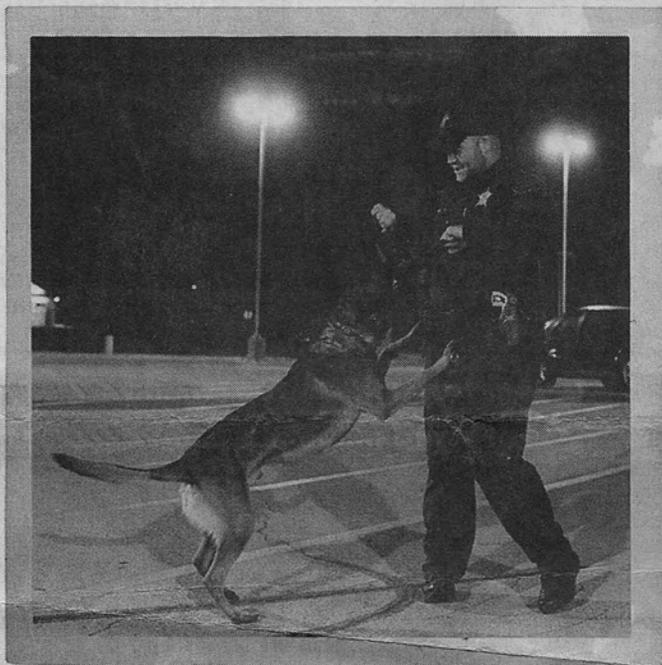


Wix's handler: 'I'm moving forward'



After death of his canine partner,
Deputy Austin Lemberger focuses on future

DOUG SCHNEIDER | PRESS-GAZETTE MEDIA

BELLEVUE — The dog depends on the man, for food and water, for shelter and exercise, for purpose in his life. The dog, Murdock, works to please the man. The dog obeys command after command. Though they are delivered in Dutch, a language foreign to the reporter and photographer observing the late-evening training session in a deserted parking lot, they are clearly familiar to the man and the animal.

The pair work as one, the gaze of the 2½-year-old Belgian Malinois rarely leaving the face of the 30-year-old Brown County sheriff's deputy. For the past two months, the deputy has been his master, his work partner, his family member.

Deputy Austin Lemberger depends

on the dog to help provide focus. On the job, and through daily training, the deputy helps the dog to become a better detector of explosives, tracker of burglary suspects, finder of missing children.

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KYLE BURSAW/PRESS-GAZETTE MEDIA@KBURSAW

Brown County sheriff's deputy and canine handler Austin Lemberger does some basic obedience with his new dog, Murdock, a Belgian Malinois, outside the department office Tuesday in Bellevue.

At the home they share, the man builds a kennel in the yard, so that when the weather grows warm again, the dog can be outside in the cool Al-louez breeze.

"It's an unexplainable bond," the deputy says, "that you have with your dog."

Barely three months ago, a partnership between the pair was unlikely. Murdock was being raised in his native Netherlands. And Lemberger already had a canine partner.

That changed Aug. 12 when the Belgian Mal who'd been Lemberger's partner for 18 months perished when an air-conditioner motor in Lemberger's patrol car malfunctioned, and a device designed to alert the deputy that the cabin was overheating failed. In the 47 minutes Lemberger was away from the vehicle while working at the PGA Championship golf tournament near Sheboygan, the heat killed canine Deputy Wix.

A month later, the deputy and Murdock were training together in New Mexico.

Lemberger doesn't invite questions about what happened Aug. 12 or in its aftermath. But he also doesn't shy away from offering answers.

Yes, he wishes Wix were still alive. No, he doesn't believe he could have prevented the death. Yes, he thinks about the dog every day.

"Wix ... it hit hard," he says. "It's about the worst thing I've experienced in my life."

Lemberger, a Manitowoc native, met with Press-Gazette Media reporter Doug Schneider and photographer Kyle Bursaw last week in his first interview since Wix's death.

On wanting to be a canine-handler: "We had German shepherds growing up. My dad and stepmom were part of the Great Lakes Search and Rescue group. My uncle was a canine officer for the Oak Creek Police. I just loved what working dogs can do."

A mock trial experience at Luxemburg-Casco High School led Lemberger to study law-enforcement at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College after he graduated from L-C in 2004. He interned with the Green Bay police and applied to

more than 30 police agencies.

On his last six months with Wix: "We had turned the corner (to become full-fledged partners). You could see us clicking ... to the point where you could see that, hey, this is awesome."

On some of the most rewarding moments with Wix: "An elderly guy walked away from a nursing home in the winter. It was cold, and there was no way the guy was gonna survive in the cold. He was an Alzheimer's patient. He didn't know where he was, didn't know what he was doing ... and we found him. And we brought him back."

On the days immediately after Wix's death: At work, "I was on patrol for two weeks without a dog, and it felt like I was missing part of my body, like I was just wandering around ... one of the key things was keeping myself busy. I never did as much housework as I did after what happened."

On the criticism he faced: "Everybody is so quick to judge. To be honest, I turned my phone off (a tabloid-style television show found his personal cellphone number). I stayed away from the TV. I didn't read the paper. I didn't watch the news. I just didn't. I had no interest in that at all ... I still haven't looked at anything. Don't want to."

"I can say this accurately: I didn't know what was being said, but to be honest, I didn't care. I knew what the facts were. I know what kind of person I am, what I stand for. I'm an honest person. I'm very respectful. I worked very hard ... (but) I knew 100 percent there was nothing that was gonna change what people think."

What he would say to people who say the dog should have been with him the whole time: "These dogs are so driven. They have so much energy that if I'd had him with me for eight hours that day, I might as well have not gone down there. I (would have had) a useless dog."

After Wix's death, the court of public opinion took sides. There was support from colleagues, sheriff's officials, officers in other departments

— and strangers. But others demanded he face charges.

“You have to figure out how to move forward and not dwell on the past,” he said. “If you dwell on the past, you’re going to be a miserable person. You can either dwell on it ... or move forward with what you learned and what you experienced, and make yourself a better person.”

On whether he wishes he could change anything: “Do I wish that dog was still alive? Hell yes. Could I have been disgruntled and upset and quit the job because of this? Yes. But I didn’t, because I love this job ... the bottom line is that I know that I did everything right. I know that ... I really don’t think I could have done anything different.”

On handing the loss: “Ultimately what carried me through this incident is that I knew who I was and what I stood for.”

On lessons he, and his department, learned: "What's to learn from it was maybe the fact that our equipment needed to be upgraded and, you know, maybe there's things that other departments could learn from this ... by bettering the equipment, maybe that will help, and by upgrading the squad cars, maybe that will help. There's so many things that might help make the chances of it happening less, but we just don't know."

"I can tell you right now that, because of my first dog, I'll be a better handler with this one."

On whether he was too reliant on his equipment: "Did I rely on the system a little bit (too much)? Maybe. Did I trust it? No; I still checked on my dog a lot ... there's calls we go on that we can't go check on him, that I can't leave where I'm at to go check on my dog ... It happened so fast, and the thing is, you can't (keep) your dog with you all the time. I can't have him walking around 100,000 (spectators all day)."

On what people should know about him as a person: "I was raised from the perspective that you do what's right, and you help people out ... I take a lot of pride, and I want to try to make this (canine) program even better than it is."

On what the future as a canine-handler holds: "I hope to do this job for another 20 years."