

10th Edition

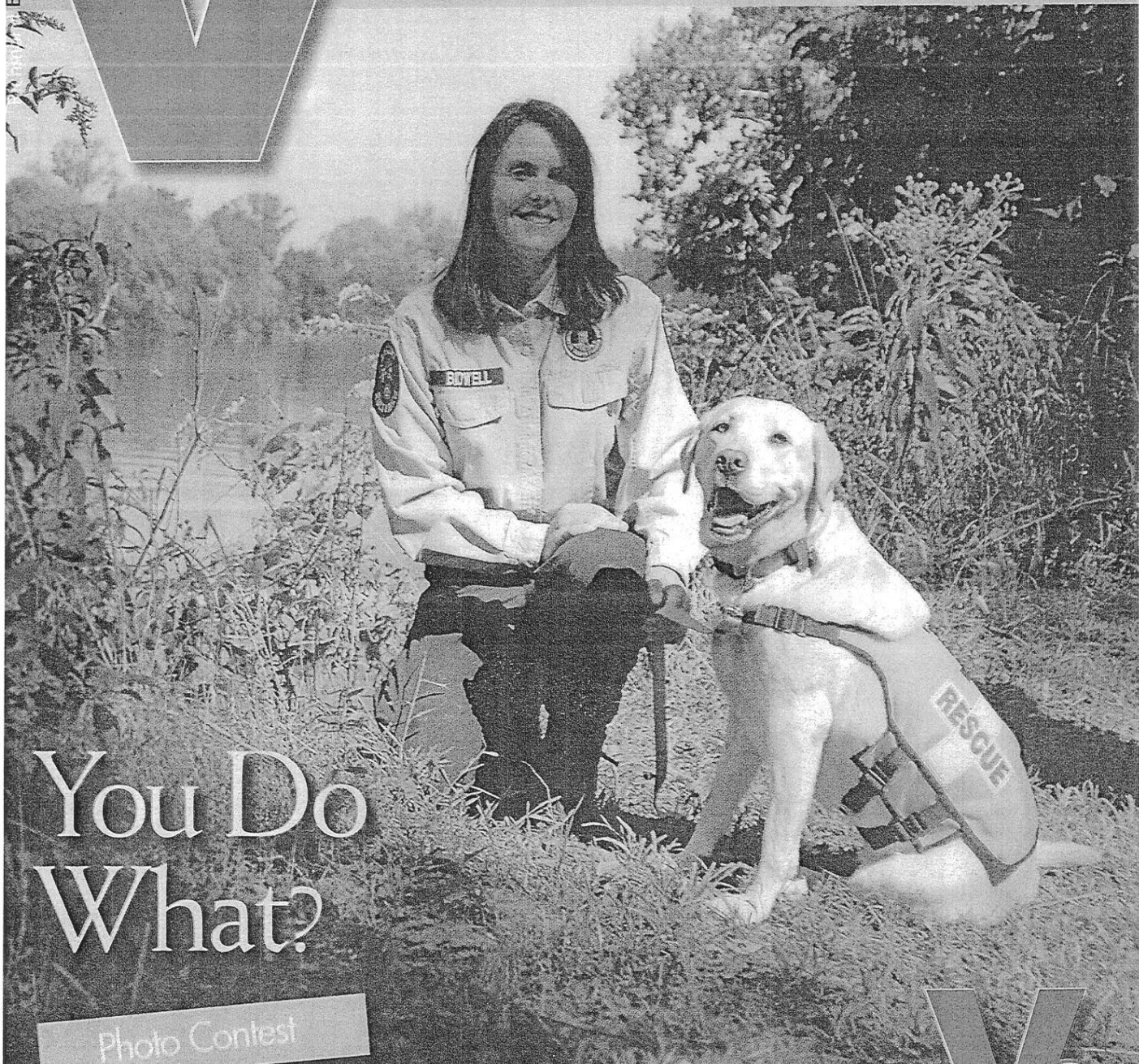
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magazine for women

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K-9 Search and Rescue

A Volunteer Making a Difference

by Libby Carty McNamee

Kim Bidwell voluntarily lives life on the edge of her seat. She never knows when she is going to receive a text message from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management letting her know that someone is missing. That "someone" could be just about anyone—a child, hiker, group of hunters, drowning victim, or, most often, disoriented Alzheimer's patient. Then the blood-pumping race against time to locate the lost person begins. "You can't sleep, can't rest, until that person is found," Kim explains. "And you're constantly learning and preparing for the next mission."

For the past 11 years, Kim has volunteered her time, energy, and heart as a rescuer with K-9 Alert Search and Rescue Dogs, a Richmond-based group offering Search and Rescue (SAR) dog resources. Her sacrifices are many and varied. In addition to taking time off her full-time job as a physical therapist's assistant, Kim has also bought her own uniforms and gear, adopted her two SAR Labradors Chessie and Petra, gone through extensive trainings, and driven all over the Commonwealth on searches without any reimbursement, even for gas.

"Each rescue effort is unique in its own way," she says, "requiring a team effort to locate the missing person."

The time commitment to participate in SAR is huge. The group participates in about 60 searches per year and trains every weekend, either Saturday night or Sunday morning, with Kim currently serving as Training Officer.

"A lot of people think we just follow the dog. It is so much more than that—you have to know search strategy, map and compass navigation, wilderness survival, pet first aid, radio communications and be able to pass

the state evaluations before you can take your dog on a search." All this training and testing usually takes two years.

Kim recommends that anyone who notices that someone is missing or overdue should call the police early instead of waiting to see if the person turns up. "No one ever minds if the person is located right away. Everyone's just happy that it all worked out. But the longer people wait to call the police, the harder it can be, especially if it is a child and it has started getting dark and cold outside."

Why does she do it? "I love dogs, being outside, helping, and giving back to the community. It is a huge time commitment, and I am fortunate to have a very understanding husband."

K-9 Alert Search and Rescue Dogs also gives educational talks to local school children to teach them what to do if they are lost in the woods. As a nonprofit organization, the group also gladly accepts donations to help buy needed life-saving equipment. It costs each handler close to \$10,000 to become search ready.

If you are interested in helping the group or learning more about SAR in central Virginia, please contact K-9 Alert Search and Rescue Dogs, Inc., P.O. Box 2572, Midlothian, VA 23113, or visit their Web site, k9alert.org. **V**

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Libby Carty McNamee is a local freelance writer, indebted to Kim for her many sacrifices, extensive training, and the role she has played in so many heroic rescues.