

[It's a dog's life, and the best way to protect it is with a bullet proof vest](#)



Cezar is a 2-year-old German shepherd, and still playful enough to rise up on his hind legs and lick your face if he — or his handler, [Santa Clara](#) police officer Chris Bell — likes you.

If, however, Cezar smells meth on your breath, or, let's say, you just shot up a convenience store, and are attempting to flee the vicinity, Cezar is not so much with the face licking. Suddenly, he is all about the arm gnawing and the leg chewing.

Cezar's bark is not worse than his bite.

But as powerful a crimestopper as he is, Cezar's fur will not stop bullets. And though he's one of four dogs on the Santa Clara department's K-9 Unit, only three of the force's canine cops come equipped with bulletproof vests. The dogs only work on felony crimes — usually to track potentially violent suspects, and occasionally to disable them — so they are almost always in harm's way.

Cezar and Bell were part of an effort Saturday by Pet Food Express to raise money so that when Bay Area police dogs go into the line of fire, they're wearing bulletproof vests, just like their human partners.

The company's 34 stores donated the proceeds from every \$15 do-it-yourself-dog-wash token it sold to the Western [States Police](#) Canine Association. By the end of the day, nine people had walked into stores and donated the \$1,200 that a single vest costs. And even before the stores had closed for the night, more than \$34,000 had been raised, according to

Pet Food Express spokesman Mike Murray. The chain has always offered free dog washes to K-9 teams, and last year a smaller fundraising campaign bought eight vests for the San

Carlos and Redwood City police departments. “That’s when the light went on that we could do this on a bigger scale and really have an impact,” Murray said.

Four-legged cops

Cezar was one of two Czech-born German shepherds performing felony vehicle stop demonstrations at the Pet Food Express store in Campbell. “When they don’t want to get out, we help them out of the car,” Bell said. This was a little joke. Another officer had opened the door of his vehicle, stuck out a heavily swaddled arm, and Cezar then repeatedly sank his teeth into the limb, apparently trying to take the arm with him as a souvenir.

At this point, anyone whose cheek Cezar had licked earlier in the day stopped and felt their face, just to make sure it was all still there.

Dogs from the Santa Clara and Oakland police departments, and the Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department, turned the store’s parking lot near the Pruneyard shopping center into Barkfest ’09, as Bell, Sgt. Steve LeCouve of Sacramento and Oakland officer Al Liwanag each tried to prove he had the most “jacked up” dog.

Dozens of people and their dogs came and went during the two-hour demonstration sessions, conducted at midday when only mad dogs and Englishmen should have been gathered on hot asphalt. Many of the dogs were sporting a new ‘do from the store’s spa, and pranced around the butch police dogs without fear. Among the most ferocious specimens were two miniature Maltese, who raced around under the long legs of Kathy Stecco, a surgeon who had come to see how her little lap dogs get along with the [Belgian Malinois](#) she wants to add to her brood.

When a police car’s lights went on and the siren started to wail during one demonstration, the hackles went up on all three dogs, and the trio of howls that ensued made it sound as if Jack London had just mushed a sled team into Campbell.

Oakland tragedy

“A lot of places don’t believe they need vests,” said Liwanag, who has seen four police dogs attacked by suspects in the four years he has partnered with [Baker](#), a brown Belgian Malinois. “But we get sent to a lot of robberies where people actually have guns. Our dogs will go to a person and bark, and they’ll keep barking until other officers arrive. That gives the suspect a little bit of distance and allows them to attack the dog.”

Baker is one of a pair of police dogs donated to the Oakland department by a woman whose only request was that they be named after her late husband, a doctor. The other dog, named Doc, retired from the K-9 unit shortly before his partner, Sgt. [Daniel Sakai](#), transferred to the [Oakland SWAT team](#). Sakai was one of four officers gunned down in March attempting to capture parolee Lovelle Mixon.

The K-9 unit was supposed to track Mixon that day, but the order was rescinded when a tip revealed his location. “That puts the dog in as dangerous a position as you’re going to get,” said Liwanag. “Obviously, he’s got no protection.”

Until now.

Contact Bruce Newman at 408-920-5004.

How to help

If you want to donate to the police dog vest fund, you can do so at any Pet Food Express location today. Or by sending a check or money order to WSPCA “Cover Your K9” Fund, P.O. Box 620629, Woodside, CA 94062.