For K-9 police dogs, it’s all about ‘the ball’; city police explain program to KIN students

WEST HAVEN (May 11, 2012) – Emergency workers, including police and fire, often speak of the “family-like” ties that exist among the rank and file membership. The kinship is also felt between K-9 police officers and their highly trained K-9 police dogs, which are mostly German Shepherds, with a few exceptions including blood hounds and Labradors.

West Haven police K-9 officers Matthew Haynes and Scott Bloom recently spoke to students in the Carrigan Intermediate School’s Positive Youth Development, Kids in the Neighborhood (KIN) after-school program operated by the West Haven Community House. The officers were accompanied by “Tex” and “Hank,” their K-9 partners.

Students were briefed by the two officers prior to meeting the K-9 dogs, and learned a lot, including the fact that a police officer with a K-9 dog can search a building as large as Carrigan Intermediate School in 10-15 minutes, versus the 20 to 30 minutes it might take without the aid of a police dog.

And how does a police dog track suspects, students were asked? “His nose?” one student guessed, correctly. “Once our dogs pick up a scent” they can track a person’s path. In addition, if a person is nervous, they give off a particular scent, and no matter how many jackets or coats are worn, they still
cannot hide it.

So whether it’s a criminal who has robbed a gas station, a grandmother who may have become lost, or a missing hospital patient, they can all be tracked via their scents.

Local K-9 units from West Haven are often called to assist other towns, officers noted. And the dogs will bite, based on the type and severity of a particular situation “and my command,” Officer Haynes noted.

“But the main thing they do is track,” including a call that day about an apartment robbery where the police dog tracked a suspect right to the door.

And be very careful when approaching a police officer who has a K-9 partner, or a police cruiser with a dog inside. “Has anyone seen a police K-9 hang outside the police car window barking?” Officer Haynes asked. “He’s not crazy. He’s just letting you know that I am his ‘Dad,’ and that he will protect me if necessary … If you touch an officer in the presence of a dog, then he will come after you.

Similarly, K-9 dogs will bark loudly and “bounce around” inside the cruiser when you approach, just “to let you know that he’s inside.”

Students were then asked, “What do you think motivates the K-9 dogs?” It’s not for food or treats and it’s not to please his handler. Rather, “dogs do it for one thing – the ball,” Hayes said, while holding up a small, tennis-sized ball. “He’s so excited for the ball,” he said, adding that when prospective K-9 dogs are picked for training, if a particular candidate does not chase a ball when thrown, “then he’s not going to be a good police dog.”

Officers also debunked a common belief that police dogs cannot track across water. “If a bad guy crosses the river, their scent hangs on top of the water … and the dog will eventually cross the river” and continue tracking on the other side.

They also dispelled another misconception. “If a bad guy drops food in his path hoping to sidetrack the dog, that won’t work, either.” Officer Haynes then told the story of a suspect leaving dog biscuits in an
attempt to lead a K-9 dog astray. “But all that did was to leave the scent of the suspect on the dog biscuits, and then the dog followed that right to the suspect’s house.”

Students were interested how police officers became K-9 officers. “In West Haven, you have to be a 3-year veteran to put you on the K-9 officer’s list,” Haynes said. After interviews and another physical, officers are sent to the state police academy in Meriden for training that can last 13-15 weeks.

During that time, officers are introduced to dogs, usually not much more than one-year-old. “New dogs will often get new handlers so they can learn together.”

One student asked about a local case involving a criminal suspect physically biting a police dog. “That was an interesting night,” Officer Haynes admitted. “That person was not in their right mind.”

The officer noted that a police dog is trained to “sit down with a voice or hand command, or both.” And once a dog comes out of the police academy, they are 60% trained. The officer in the field then continues the training one-on-one with their dog.

Among the skills the dogs are trained for include finding objects, which they “will find, but not touch unless instructed, which keeps the evidence intact.” In addition, they are trained to “grab and hold” a suspect without leaving bite marks, for the most part, although bruising is possible, especially for suspects who may resist.

Officers were asked if police dogs retire. “Well, it has more to do with their hips and back,” Officer Haynes said. Some K-9 dogs retire at 4 or 5-years-old due to hip displacement. But more typically, police dogs retire between the ages of 8 and 12.

Officer Haynes related the story of his former K-9 dog who retired at 10-and-a-half years old. West Haven allows retired police dogs to live permanently with their police officer handlers, and “German Shepherds are great family dogs,” as his two young boys will play with him, pull his hair and tail, etc …

“He still wants to work, and yes, he’s jealous of my current K-9 partner,” Haynes added. “Every day when I leave for work, he still sits at the front door waiting to go with me, and then my wife has to listen to him for about an hour afterward.”
Do the two dogs get along? Officer Haynes was asked. “They don’t,” he said, with a laugh.

It was then time to go out into the Carrigan Intermediate School playground area, where both officers had their patrol cars and dogs inside.

Each took turns demonstrating various techniques involving their K-9 partners, including grabbing and holding and finding objects in the field.

Students then had a chance to view some of the police gear officers carry in their patrol cruisers, as well as meet the dogs up close and personal.

KIN program director Carol James said afterward, “The officers did a great job introducing our students to working with K-9 police dogs. We all learned a lot, and I want to thank the officers and the West Haven Police Department for the opportunity for our kids to see first-hand how humans and animals work together to keep us all safer.”