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Shared passion unites volunteers

By Mary Ann Ford

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NORMAL - Greg Horn credits his German shepherd, Asta, for the creation of the Illinois Search Dogs Inc.

"I was working on another team with her - and I learned to love the people involved," said Horn. "The time I spent with her really developed a special bond."

When Horn moved to Menard County he wanted to continue the training.

He met two people - Steve Miller and Tina Shaw of Springfield - who had similar passions.

The three started the not-for-profit Illinois Search Dogs Inc. in July 2003. Joan Brehm, an Illinois State University assistant professor of sociology, joined a short time later.

Members of the all-volunteer team come from throughout central and southern Illinois and include firefighters, emergency medical technicians and paramedics. There are similar groups elsewhere in the state.

Members don't have to own a dog to be active in the group.

"A lot of the members of the team don't handle dogs but are vital to what we do," said Brehm.

During a recent training session in Normal, Nicole Earnhart of Springfield played the role of a disaster victim, hiding in obscure places to help train "live-find" dogs.

Team members also help set up scenarios to train dogs or to help scout an area.

Human remains are used to train "cadaver" dogs to ensure they can help in real situations. Brehm said the group follows strict standards: teeth with attached tissue comes from dentist offices, human hair from barber shops, blood from bandages and bone from schools of medicine or pathologists.

"When training a young dog, we start with bone, tissue or hair," Brehm said. When the dogs are more advanced, they move to blood.

"We train them with recent samples and old," she said. "We want them to recognize the continuum of scent decomposition."

Because the dogs often work in treacherous situations, team members also take training to help keep the dogs healthy.

"They (the dogs) won't tell you when they are injured," Brehm said. "They are such hard workers. We do extensive (body) checks after the search. We're very, very cautious with their health."

From a seminar on canine performance medicine, Brehm learned stretching exercises to do with her two dogs before and after work and ways to evaluate potential problems.

"The knowledge is critical to me being able to take care of them," she said.