

Photography by Marisa Hugonnett



Sammy the Fire Dog

Written by Krista Kessler

Man's Best Friend Teaches Fire Safety to Katy Kids

Pets and hugs follow Sammy's busy morning of teaching Katy school children how to stop, drop, and roll in the event of a fire.

At the tender age of 9 months, the yellow lab puppy already holds a day job at the Katy Fire Department, where he helps teach the basics and importance of fire safety to Katy youth at schools, birthday parties, churches, and various other events around town, including the Rice Harvest Festival. Sammy and dad, Gus, also a fire dog, have been busy getting the word out about fire safety.

The father and son team not only display the appropriate actions for kids to take in the case of a house fire, but also hold their concentration. "The kids pay more attention when a dog is present, because they are so excited to pet him or see what he'll do," says T.J. Horn, who owns Sammy and works as a public information officer for the fire department. "They are mesmerized."

Breaking Tradition

While not like most firemen, Sammy and Gus are also not much like other fire dogs. Traditionally, the public has associated Dalmatians with firemen, Horn says. "It has been a tradition since the early days, since Dalmatians are authoritative dogs," he says. "They're perfect for the job." Despite Sammy's pedigree, Horn places faith in his ability to keep Katy kids safe. "Sammy is a yellow lab, but he's a smart dog," Horn says.

With excess energy to burn, Sammy spends his free time at the fire station, running up and down the stairway. Exercise helps to expend all of his extra energy, so he can learn all he needs to know while still in training. "He's still young, so it will take a while for him to calm down," Horn says. Sammy is catching on quick, though, showing a decent amount of obedience to his master and coming right when called.

Following in His Papa's Paw Steps

As Sammy works to perfect his stop, drop, and roll routine, as well as how to stay low and crawl, dad Gus, a chocolate lab, begins to wrap up his time as a fire dog. As Gus ages, he needs to be replaced by a younger dog in good shape with more vitality. Son Sammy will fill Gus' fire boots, taking over the fire safety education program after he completes his training.



T.J. Horn, Sammy, and Shawn Ryan



A Katy Elementary fifth-grade class meets Sammy



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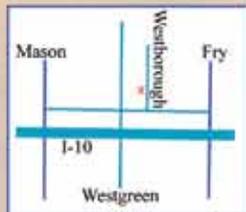
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Sammy's trainer Steve Hendrix and T.J. Horn




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Steve Hendrix of Steve Hendrix Kennels aides Horn in training Sammy, anticipating he will be ready to serve as a fire dog by October 2010. In the meantime, Sammy must do his homework, learning how to howl at smoke detectors, so he can interact even more with kids, surprising them with his awareness and hopefully inspiring them to learn more about their own fire detectors at home.

Inspiring Safe Habits

Sammy already knows how to shake, sit, and turn, which comes in handy during fire safety presentations. A dog's availability to present the correct activities works well, so a person does not feel inclined to demonstrate himself down on the floor, which the firemen are grateful for.

With the students' full attention, Sammy wags his bushy tail, shakes a firefighter's hand, and helps inspire the next generation of safe Katy citizens. Both Sammy and Gus have proven innovative tools for the fire industry, as well as loveable ones, and kids and adults alike can appreciate that. KM

KRISTA KESSELER is a Katy resident with two dogs at home who could never complete fire dog training like Sammy.

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