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## SALUTE TO SAGE

# Rescue dog leaves behind legacy of public service

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Posted: Tuesday, February 4, 2014 6:00 am

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Posted on Feb 4, 2014 by Andrew Wellner

WASILLA — As origin stories go, Sage a search and rescue dog that found more than a dozen people during her life-saving career, has a pretty amazing one.

Sage, who died in December 2013, was found at the age of 3 months after a run-in with a car. Stacie Burkhardt and her then-husband took the dog in.

“We had two dogs already. I wasn’t even going to keep her. Can you imagine?” Burkhardt said Saturday during a memorial service her friends and colleagues with Mat-Su Search and Rescue organized at a Wasilla fire station.

Almost immediately, Burkhardt said, she knew she wouldn’t be giving Sage up. Two months later at age 5 months, Sage showed Burkhardt her potential. Burkhardt and friends were hiking in the mountains in Washington



Courtesy Stacie Burkhardt

## Sage memorial

Sage the search and rescue dog poses with handler Stacie Burkhardt. The pair were together 15 years, finding four living people and the remains of nine more in that time. Sage died in December 2013.



“Three other people went on and within seconds they were screaming ‘avalanche!’” Burkhardt said.

Sage and Burkhardt also were caught up in the slide. They rolled three or four times, coming to rest with Sage on top of Burkhardt — a fortuitous arrangement as Sage was then able to dig them both out.

Then they dug out the rest. One person Burkhardt rescued by unhooking his backpack. They used his shovel to dig out the person who was buried deepest. He wasn’t breathing when they reached him, but when they got the snow cleared he came back to life.

“He had a wicked headache the rest of the day, but he was fine,” Burkhardt said. “He was her best friend for the rest of her life.”

Burkhardt said she believes that if Sage had not sensed the danger in the slope they would have lost at least one friend that day. She hadn’t really done search and rescue work before then. But recognizing Sage’s potential, Burkhardt decided it was something she wanted to do.

So they signed up with a group near Seattle while they waited for an opening. Then they joined King County Search Dogs, and that’s when Sage really started to shine.

“It was a perfect fit,” Burkhardt said.

She said Sage was used to long-distance hiking. She wasn’t the type to go out on a search excitedly and start burning energy. She was more driven and focused. Some in the search group read that as a sign Sage wouldn’t make it.

“When she was 5 she made her first find,” Burkhardt said. “The next month she found another one.”

That first person was an elderly woman who was standing in shallow water, unable to crawl up onto the bank. Burkhardt said that after the search, knowing she had saved that woman, she was walking on clouds for a month.

Sage would go on to find two more living people and nine bodies of accident and homicide victims. After 10 years working in the mountains of Seattle, Burkhardt said she needed a change.

She’d been to Alaska to train search dogs and loved some of the adventures people had taken her on. So she and Sage came north. They were founding members of

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flying to remote villages.

“We don’t have as many searches, but they’re a hell of a lot more adventure,” she said.

In July 2012, Sage made a find, locating the remains of a man who drowned in Matanuska Lake.

Donna Cramer, a member of the search dog group, said that what Sage accomplished was remarkable.

“To put it in perspective, some dog teams, they’ll go their entire career of the search dog and never have a find,” Cramer said. “This dog has just gone ‘vavoom!’ to the point of the King County Sheriff’s Office asking for her by name.”

Burkhardt said the learning in the search and rescue work wasn’t a one-way street.

“I know we’re going to continue and learn from everything she taught me,” she told the group members Saturday, her voice cracking. “I hope everyone does experience finding someone with your dog.”

Contact Andrew Wellner at 352-2270 or [andrew.wellner@frontiersman.com](mailto:andrew.wellner@frontiersman.com).

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Mat-Su Valley Frontiersman  
**Phone number:** 907-352-2250  
**E-mail:**  
[contact@frontiersman.com](mailto:contact@frontiersman.com)  
**Address:**  
 5751 E. Mayflower Ct.  
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