

# Caber and Kim

By Kim Gramlich, MA

When the call came in, Caber and I were attending our team graduation from the Pacific Assistance Dogs Society (PADS). A 15-year-old teenager had been attacked in North Delta while walking through a local park on a beautiful sunny afternoon. Her day's plan had been simple—meet some friends and watch a football game. But nothing would be the same after her friends heard Laura's screams and ran to try to help. They found her badly beaten and unconscious body lying on the forest floor. From that moment forward their lives would never be the same. The following day Laura died of her injuries. A family and a community were devastated.

The shock that our first major deployment was to be in response to a homicide sat heavy with me. My canine partner, Caber, had spent the past two-and-a-half years training to become an assistance dog. After he passed all the necessary tests he was more than prepared for what was to come his way. I, on the other hand, had just been trained in how to handle an assistance dog properly. Caber seemed self-assured and confident, but was I prepared to deploy him with a community devastated by pain and loss? I had worked in victim services for many years and knew the job like the back of my hand, that wasn't the problem. The problem was that Caber was the first victim services Trauma K9 in Canada, and I was unsure about how my clients would receive my somewhat unconventional partner.

I was the passionate voice behind the idea, so why the hesitation? A year previously I attended the National Organization for Victims Assistance conference in Scottsdale, Arizona. Like all good conference attendees, I chose a variety of workshops intended to open my horizons and expand my knowledge of the field—the most intriguing of which was a workshop called “Crisis Response Canines”. As I sat through the workshop I literally buzzed with excitement over the concept of working alongside a helping canine (yes, I see myself working alongside Caber, not the other way around). I listened to Anthony Pagliuca, from the Scottsdale Police Crisis Intervention Unit, talk about his amazing dog, Fozzie. Anthony told story after story of Fozzie's interventions with people affected by crime and trauma. The audience cried (myself included) at the heart-wrenching ways Fozzie had positively impacted people suffering from life-altering trauma. I thanked Anthony for his wonderful presentation and received a fabulous kiss from Fozzie, not realizing the full impact these two would have on my future.

After leaving Scottsdale vibrating with anticipation, I calmed myself down and decided to wait six months before doing anything about the idea brewing within. I spent that time researching animal-assisted intervention, dog assistance schools and the cost of the initiative I wanted to propose. When it was all said and done, my interest had not waned. I was ready to cross my fingers and pitch the idea.

I quickly garnered the support of my Chief, Jim Cessford. Chief Cessford is the longest serving Police Chief in Canadian history, and for good reason. He is visionary, he is a leader and he doesn't let an opportunity pass him by. With his support, I made a similar presentation to our police board. Questions about liability, insurance, costs, commitment and succession planning were raised. Of all the questions asked, the most important one was “what does the dog do?” Although I had some idea, it would be Caber who would ultimately prove the value and role he would play.



With management support in hand, the next big step was to get a dog! I applied to PADS and eventually met Ron Tymrick, Director of Client Services, for an interview. It was clear he was a little unsure about my proposition. Ron listened carefully and asked great questions about the role of the dog, the nature of our clients, the environment the dog would work in and what the dog would be exposed to. It became clear that PADS had never placed a dog to work in a capacity like victim services. I explained how our work was somewhat unusual. We intervene immediately after the trauma has taken place. This can mean we attend the scene of the crime, the hospital, the victim's home or even the roadside. We meet our clients when their pain, hurt, anger, shame, embarrassment, grief and loss are at an all-time high. Essentially, we intervene at the worst time in a person's life. We attend to victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, robbery, home invasion, homicide and every imaginable trauma in between. We see raw emotion—the kind that tears at the hardest of hearts.

Ron listened, but he also talked. Ron told me about the other clients that PADS already served. He told me how the organization had been placing service dogs with people with disabilities for more than 23 years. They accompany their clients everywhere: to work, on public transit, to doctor's appointments and to school. They turn lights on in the morning, help pull back the covers,



open the bedroom door and the cereal cupboard. These amazing dogs pick up the smallest dropped items and pull wheelchairs up steep ramps. Among the million other remarkable things they do, PADS dogs provide companionship to people who have been dealt hard knocks in life. Imagine having the most loving and non-judgmental partner with you 24 hours a day... and you have imagined a PADS dog.

Fortunately, I didn't scare PADS off and they generously agreed to be the organization to provide us with our Trauma K9. PADS brought six beautiful yellow and black Labrador retriever dogs to my office for a "site visit". When it was all said and done, a certain yellow lab named Caber seemed to be the front-runner. They say that PADS dogs choose you, you don't choose them. Nothing could be more true. Caber was unfazed by every test given to him and, most importantly, he captured our hearts immediately.

Caber was (and is) an extremely low-energy dog. He calms instantly in new environments and around new people. His large amber eyes seem to reach in and pull at your heartstrings. He is curious about emotion and never reacts negatively to wailing, crying or even screaming. He wants nothing more than to be petted and warm your feet. Most importantly, Caber seems to have a sixth sense. He senses and spontaneously moves to be with the person who seems to need him the most. I can't tell you how many times this has drawn tears from those who meet him.

Clearly, Caber was the right dog got the right job. But what about the other end of the leash? I was still nervous about deploying Caber. Although I'd received tremendous support, I had also spoken with people who thought my idea was ridiculous. Was I about to become the "crazy dog lady"? More importantly, would introducing Caber to clients be seen as disrespectful or unwelcome? My motto had always been "do no harm" and I was committed to providing the most effective and helpful support possible.

PADS dogs are not normal family pets. They are highly trained assistance dogs that are granted public access by the province. There are specific requirements in how they are handled. You could say I was also a little nervous that somehow I would mess up a \$30,000 dog!

Caber and I had only just begun to know one another when the homicide happened and we were thrust into our new role. We anxiously attended Laura's school where an assembly was held in the gymnasium geared towards calming a terrified community. Caber and I stood on the sidelines, watching 250 faces filled with confusion and fear. The Mayor, Chief of Police and Superintendent of Schools each spoke. Unbeknownst to me, Caber and I were to be introduced next. As we walked to the centre of the gymnasium, all eyes fell upon Caber and half of them spontaneously filled with tears. I have never seen anyone or anything elicit such instant and raw emotion as Caber did in that moment. I was shocked at the response and terrified at what I, one victim services worker, could do for this room filled with hurting people. I quickly realized there was little I needed to do. You see, a loving dog brings out healthy emotions in people. A loving dog helps you understand what you are feeling and makes it okay for those emotions to come to the surface. Research even

shows that merely looking at a dog can cause a surge of oxytocin, the “love hormone”. To those of us accepting, dogs make us feel nurtured, not unlike that of a mother’s love.

Caber spent the remainder of that day providing comfort and affection to hundreds of students and teachers. But, little did we know, our biggest test was still to come. The following day was the first official day back to school after the homicide. Laura’s teachers were worried about how to honour her memory and address the painful void her absence had left. And so, an idea was born. I was asked if Caber could attend each and every one of Laura’s classes and sit by her desk in her absence. Caber gently and lovingly sat at the feet of each of Laura’s desks, as we travelled through her timetable. His non-threatening presence provided a calming and cathartic source of comfort for the students. At any given time 10 to 15 teenagers surrounded Caber. Through him, they talked about their pain and loss in a healthy way. As for me, my Trauma K9 had effectively rendered me useless! I calmly sat on the sidelines watching, as Caber worked his magic. He comforted the students in a way that I could not, despite all my years of experience and training. The greatest compliment Caber received is one I have heard from many clients since... several teens said, “He was exactly what I needed”.

Since Caber’s first deployment he has provided support to more than 500 victims of crime and trauma. At my side, we have given presentations to more than 3,500 people across Canada and the United States about the tremendous impact of assistance dogs. Caber was the first Trauma K9 of his kind in Canada and we are proud to say there are three other dogs working in a similar capacity today... and hopefully many more to come.




Today, Caber is breaking new ground again. In victim services we work with clients from the moment a crime happens all the way through the criminal justice system. It seemed a perfect extension of his work that Caber also provides support to clients when they go to court. As such, Caber is now also the first Courthouse Dog in Canada. In a pilot project with the Surrey Crown Counsel (sincere thanks to Winston Sayson and Paul Sandhu for their leadership and support), Caber has attended

several Crown Counsel interviews with anxious victims who are preparing for court. It is our hope that Caber will soon be sitting with his clients and providing comfort while they testify in the courtroom.

This initiative began in an effort to provide a new means of support to vulnerable victims of crime and trauma. But Caber has made this project so much more. Among the many things he has taught me, I now truly understand the value of embracing people for who they are and accepting where they stand. You see, when Caber meets a client, there is a deep and powerful bond that is created almost instantly. This bond occurs because Caber creates instant trust with everyone he meets. He doesn’t care about the colour of your skin, the job you do, the choices you make or where you came from. He provides loving care and support to anyone and everyone. We could all learn a lesson or two from a dog.



## PADS

To learn more about assistance dogs, please visit [www.pads.ca](http://www.pads.ca). To learn more about courthouse dogs, please visit [www.courthousedogs.org](http://www.courthousedogs.org). To learn more about Caber, please visit [www.deltapolice.ca](http://www.deltapolice.ca) and please enjoy this video about Caber at <http://youtu.be/jDHRqNIF-BU> (sincere thanks to Justice Canada for their support). 

## About the author



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