

THEY LIVE AMONG US

A childhood in Europe, a farm in Ruch, Search and Rescue in Josephine County—Karen Giese is one of the fascinating Applegaters who live among us

BY DIANA COOGLE

Karen Giese tells stories about working with the Search and Rescue (SAR) K9 team in Josephine County, but what she talks about best is the work of her SAR dog Morgan, a flat-coated retriever.

“SAR isn’t for just any dog,” Karen says. “Some breeds aren’t good at it. You can’t train a five-year-old dog. A little city dog won’t like this work.”

But Morgan has several advantages: retrievers were bred to bring something back, he is the son of a SAR dog, and he was a small puppy when Karen started hiding things for him to find.

Only dogs certified by the Oregon State Sheriffs’ Association can go on a search. Morgan is certified in two categories: air scent (off leash) and human remains. He helps find lost kids and hikers; mushroom hunters, who, their eyes on the ground, lost track of where they were going; people with dementia who wandered off; and missing bodies. After a find, Karen rewards Morgan with his favorite ball.

SAR gets one or two calls a month, Karen says, although with GPS on cell phones these days, the number of such calls has diminished.

Karen has also helped the SAR team by writing grants for GPS units, crates for transporting dogs, powerful head lamps, and other needed equipment.

SAR also needs materials to train dogs on—donated bodies, placentas that are cut up and put in jars, the soil beneath a dead body. “We have to make sure the remains

are ‘honest,’” Karen says—uncontaminated. For training, remains are hidden, in thickets or under logs, or even thrown into trees so the dogs learn to look up. “I put human teeth in a saltshaker and throw it into the bushes,” she says. “There are no footprints, and the dog can’t trail me to the source.” A good SAR dog, like Morgan, must also be able to ride in helicopters and rappel cliffs.

A dog who has made a find returns to the team to “tell us what’s going on,” Karen says, by using a trained final response, such as barking, jumping, sitting, or lying down, according to training. The dog then leads the team to the find.

Karen was born in Austria to parents who went to Europe during World War II—her father in the US Army, her mother in the Red Cross—and stayed for 20 years. As a child and teenager, Karen attended international schools in places like Paris, Barcelona, and Seville—Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France, and Italy. At 17, she came to the US to attend the University of Oregon.



Karen Giese and her search-and-rescue dog, Morgan, at the McKenzie Fire in 2020.

After earning a master’s degree in psychology and counseling, Karen worked with at-risk kids at Community Works in Medford. While still with that job, she got married and moved with her husband to a 68-acre ranch in Ruch, from which she commuted 24 miles four or five times a week, coming home, often after dark, to feed the animals and take care of the horses. She loved the ranch, but after 20

years, the responsibilities were taking a toll. Then, divorced, she moved to Jacksonville ten years ago.

While still living on the ranch, she joined Women Helping Other Women (WHOW), a group of Applegate Valley women who take turns helping each other with tasks at their respective homes. “WHOW saved me with that piece of property,” Karen says.

Now, besides her work with SAR (and WHOW) and activities like traveling, hiking, yoga, and swim classes, Karen is a geriatrics care manager. A client might be an adult living in California whose elderly parent, who lives here, now needs different living arrangements. “I arrange the closure of the house for the necessary move,” Karen explains, “or I organize in-home care if that’s what’s needed.”

This important and helpful work fits right in with other aspects of Karen’s life. The close bond she has with her brothers has been a big influence on her. Growing up in Europe gave her broad perspectives that became the underpinning of a life spent helping people and animals—kids in trouble; horses, ducks, and dogs on the farm; children and others who are lost; people who find closure for grief when the body of a loved one is found. In this way, Karen finds fulfillment in a useful life. And Morgan gets to play with his favorite ball.

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Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service

BY ISABEL JALAMOV

On January 20, 2025, more than 30 volunteers gathered at the Provolt Recreation Site for a hands-on habitat restoration event in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Organized by United Community Action Network (UCAN) AmeriCorps members in collaboration with the Friends of the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, the Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council (APWC), Project Beaver, and Pollinator Project Rogue Valley, the event focused on improving riparian habitat to support beavers around the Applegate River Valley and beyond. Volunteers worked in specialized teams to enhance ecosystem resilience by planting native vegetation, removing invasive species, and forging a new trail for more people to recreate in the area.

The willow-planting team, led by Caleb Galloway with APWC and Jakob Shockey with Project Beaver, worked along the riparian corridor, installing over 350 willow and 180 cottonwood stakes, which will provide food and building material for beavers in the future. These willows will also help stabilize the riverbank, reduce erosion, and create essential habitat for a variety of species, including beavers.

The invasive-removal teams tackled encroaching Himalayan blackberry and other nonnative plants that crowd out native vegetation. Volunteers cleared

one-third of an acre of overgrowth, opening space for native plants to thrive and improving access to the waterway for wildlife.

The trail-forging team cleared 96 yards of overgrown trail to improve accessibility. Volunteers removed debris, trimmed vegetation, and reinforced the pathway to ensure more access for visitors, including those participating in future restoration efforts and educational programs.

The event concluded with a debrief focused on the impact of the day’s efforts and how participants can stay engaged in community service. Volunteers shared their experiences, discussed the long-term benefits of their service, and explored ways to continue supporting conservation initiatives. Stacie Strombom, a UCAN AmeriCorps member serving as the estuary explorers educator at the South Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, said, “It was amazing to see just how dedicated all the volunteers were. So much blackberry was pulled up in just two hours that it felt like it had magically disappeared. It felt encouraging to see the recreation site cleared of invasives, with small cottonwood and willow stakes shooting out of the ground. I feel better connected to the land there after helping to steward it.”

Amy Kendall from the Provolt Volunteer Team encouraged participants



In an attempt to restore beaver habitat, a group of volunteers remove invasive blackberries from the banks of the Applegate River at Provolt Recreation Site. Photo: Isabel Jalamov.

to stay involved by joining the crew for ongoing habitat restoration efforts at Provolt Recreation Site. For more information on how to get involved in the community, visit the Bureau of Land Management’s website at blm.gov/visit/provolt-recreation-site or connect with local groups like the Friends of the

Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument for upcoming restoration events and stewardship opportunities.

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