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Four legged valour

How three dogs and a 21-pound cat saved their owners' lives

Iris Benaroya, National Post

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Last week, Jarod worked his tush on the red carpet. Down he strutted, hairier than Joaquin Phoenix. His tongue, as purple as an eggplant, suggested he'd been hitting the red wine all afternoon.

If this were a Hollywood shindig, that might have been the case, but Jarod is a chow chow, and despite a real knack for posturing, this was the Purina Animal Hall of Fame Awards at the PawsWay Pet Discovery Centre (the Hall of Fame is a permanent fixture

there), at Toronto's Harbourfront.

Last Monday afternoon, four creatures -- Ace, Sophie, the aforementioned Jarod, and a cat named Nemo -- had come to Toronto from as far away as British Columbia to be inducted into the Animal Hall of Fame for acts of bravery.

There are now 142 members of the Animal Hall of Fame, an airy space with lots of light and exposed ductwork. Blown-up pictures of dogs and cats (and horses, too) are accompanied by stories illustrating their selfless acts. The difference between this museum and others is the "whoops station" out front, which has cleaning solvents should your pet decide to leave a mark of his own in the hall.

A visit here should be mandatory for all school-age kids as a primer on the kindness of animals. Think beasts are bereft of altruistic love? Read about the seeing-eye dog Gamma, a Lab who pushed her owner out of the path of a speeding car, and got herself severely banged up as a result. Or Trixie, a pooch who prevented a toddler from drowning by holding on to the youngster's sleeve.

But those are heroes of days gone by. Back on the red carpet, Jarod was about to enjoy his 15 minutes. A short video was shown, explaining how he had saved his owner Donna Perreault from being mauled by a bear. Close-ups showed Jarod at home in Genelle, B. C., looking shrewd and powerful, in various sultry poses, the wind whipping against his black fur.

When the video ended, a Ride of the Valkyries-type track kicked in, and out shot Jarod, ready to take a bow. The crowd craned their heads and the paparazzi swooped with their flashbulbs as he received his medal on a red ribbon.

"The bear charged me three times," said Perreault. "The first time I whacked him in the nose with a bucket. Then I whacked him in the nose with mop. That's when he swatted me in the neck and Jarod went for him."

Angy Papadimitriou hit the stage next, clutching her cat Nemo to her chest as if he were a bag of potting soil. One morning, the 21-pound feline meowed bossily at her to wake up after failing to rouse Angy's husband, by whom he's usually fed. Angy woke to discover her husband's heart had stopped beating. But Nemo saved the day in the nick of time. (Truth be told, there were a few snide murmurings among dog lovers in the audience that the cat may just have been after breakfast.)

Then came Sophie, a Bichon Frise from Olds, Alta. Last June, the persistent fluff-ball with pom-poms for ears turned somersaults on owner Mary-Ann Lazurko's bed, alerting her that her diabetic daughter, Belinda, had slipped into a coma.

"With Sophie, it was like we had won the lottery," said Lazurko, who pointed out that the dog was a gift from her son, Belinda's brother, "and now Sophie has saved his sister."

Sophie's video concluded with Lazurko bawling into the camera, eliciting a loud snuffle from a man at the back of the room. In fact, by this part of the ceremony, the entire assembly was teary.

"No use in wearing makeup for this, is there?" said the woman sitting next to me, as we dabbed at our drippy mascara in unison.

For some reason, Ace the Dutch Shepherd really touched me. He is an antsy dog with searching eyes -- you could tell he'd rather be bounding through the forest: "He was too much dog for the people who had him. He doesn't want to sit on a couch. For him, it's go, go, go!" said Ray Lau, his owner, who put him to work last December as a search and rescue volunteer dog with the Hamilton Police Services.

Ace had a smashing first day on the job. During a severe snowstorm, he found a missing woman unconscious in the snow.

For the ceremony, Lau and Ace were in uniform: navy-blue for Lau with "canine search team" written on the back of it, and a neon orange vest for Ace. Lau spoke with zeal when asked about Ace's accomplishments, whom Lau refers to as "his canine partner" just like Starsky and Hutch.

"Ace is driven, he's high-energy," says Lau, "And he doesn't get food as a reward, he gets a tug toy. Soon as he sees it, he knows it's time to work -- play is work. We trained for 1,000 hours last year to get here. He's an unpaid professional."

Throughout the spiel, Ace cocked his head up at Lau. I looked at Lau. Lau looked at me. Ace looked at Lau. The dog was itching to go. You could see it in the way his leg twitched. But he would stand by his

partner for as long as the afternoon went on.

ibenaroya@nationalpost.com

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