

## Dogs help safety educators bond with students

Students who shy away from authority figures at school might be keeping secrets about peers who plot violence. Classmates can prevent school-related threats by reporting early signs. But good luck with getting students to confide in you.

A New York school resource officer wondered if a dog might have a better chance than her in breaking this powerful student code of silence. Teens will shut out adults in a show of loyalty to their friends. Officer **Juli Lathrop**, is a Chemung County sheriff's deputy assigned to work at **Broadway Middle School** in Elmira, N.Y. She thought her dog might get students to warm up to her. So she brought her Rottweiler, Kramer, to school. By the end of the first day, students "all knew my dog's name and mine since they started talking to the dog but ended up talking to me."

Lathrop continued Kramer's school visits. Eventually, students began telling her about weapons at school. As a result, Lathrop was able to confiscate more weapons and weapons incidents dropped. There were 40 weapons violations in 1998 between September and January, but only eight over the same period of time in 1999, after Kramer's visits began.

As a result of her success, Lathrop initiated a program called K-9s Representing Alternative Modern Educational Resources, or **KRAMER** for short. She tells students to be as suspicious of unknown people on the Internet as they would be with strangers who ask them to search for a lost puppy. Schools from across the county contact Lathrop to schedule safety talks.

If you want to try the canine approach to improve students' relationships with school authorities as a way of bolstering school safety, Lathrop offered these tips:

- **Find a source of dogs.** A police officer can bring a dog to school. Animal shelters often loan dogs out so they can get exercise and social contact. Shelter personnel will often transport the animals to school and may assist the SRO who handles the dogs by monitoring students' interaction with the animals.
- **Test a dog's temperament.** A school resource officer should interact with a dog to make sure it's friendly enough to play with students before bringing it to school.
- **Walk the dog at school.** A SRO can walk the dog

### Dogs calm students in crisis

**Juli Lathrop**, a school resource officer at **Broadway Middle School** in Elmira, N.Y., said her dog helped calm students during the September 11, 2001 crisis. "When the towers went down, students were terrified the country was going to war and some were convinced they'd be drafted."

Lathrop said students had seen televised news reports about terrorist organizations that showed youths bearing arms. As a result, some students thought they would be sent to fight against these young soldiers. The school rumor mill worked overtime.

"We talked till we were blue in the face but got nowhere reassuring the students," Lathrop said. So she brought out Kramer and reassured the students that Kramer said there was absolutely no way they were going to be drafted.

It took "Kramer's promise, sealed with a paw shake and a kiss, and they were good to go," Lathrop said. ■

while students are in the school hallways. Students enjoy visiting the dog. This helps them to get to know the SRO.

- **Reward students with dog visits.** Students who obey safety rules can earn time with the dogs during school breaks. For example, a student could take a dog to check for unsecured doors or strange cars outside and anything that looks out of place. They then report to Lathrop. This helps them feel important and bond with the SRO.

- **Train dogs to demonstrate safety messages.** For example, most pet owners can teach a dog to rollover to illustrate the stop, drop and roll fire safety technique.

- **Pretend safety messages are the dog's idea.** Students enjoy doing things for a dog they won't do for adults. Lathrop said some teens signed a no-smoking pledge after being told, "Kramer says, 'Don't smoke cigarettes,'" even though they know the dog can't really talk.

- **Let the community vote on whether dogs stay.** When someone questioned whether dogs belonged in schools, Lathrop withdrew them. But parents were so enamored with the program, they mounted a media campaign and got the dogs reinstated. ■

*E-mail Lathrop at [jlathrop@elmiracityschools.com](mailto:jlathrop@elmiracityschools.com).*