

'He was a very loving dog,' children say
Community bids farewell to Kramer, a dog who listened to kids.
By Ray Finger

rfinger@stargazette.com

Star-Gazette

September 23, 2006

SOUTHPORT -- Young and old came Friday to Olthof Funeral Home to say farewell to a friend who knew how to listen deeply and make people feel loved without saying a word.

A special service was held to honor Kramer, a 9-year-old Rottweiler well known at Broadway Middle School where he accompanied school resource officer Juli Lathrop, a Chemung County sheriff's deputy.

"It was the community that said we have to have this," Lathrop said, "because he has touched so many lives and changed so many lives, and the fact that it's such an emotional bond that he's had."

The circumstances in which Kramer met many people, especially children, were some of the worst times of their lives, Lathrop said.

"They wanted a way to be able to pay respects for what he's done for them and to have a chance to have some closure."

It might seem unusual to have a service for a canine, but only to those who did not know Kramer or the impact that he had, said Rob Olthof, president and owner of the funeral home.

"We always have tried to recognize a need in the community for any type of figure that has impacted people's lives," he said.

"We've tried to be here as a community support source."

At the front of the room were pedestals displaying flowers, Kramer's collar and an ornately carved oak box containing his cremated remains.

Best friends Nicole Cornish and Emily Wenzel, both 11 and sixth-graders at Broadway Middle School, reminisced over a red Jolly Ball on display that they said Kramer liked to chew on.

"He was a dog that would help everybody and he was a very loving dog, and I miss him," Nicole said.

"I remember the first time I saw him six years ago."

Emily said Kramer meant a lot to her because of the way he listened to kids.

"If they had a problem, he would sit there and listen to them and he wouldn't make fun of them or anything," she said.



JEFF RICHARDS/Star-Gazette
Ron Unwin, Chemung County Sheriff's Department correction officer, hugs Juli Lathrop, Chemung County Sheriff's deputy and resource officer at Broadway Middle School, on the passing of her dog Kramer. With Lathrop at the Olthof Funeral Home is Kramer Anderson Jr., one of Kramer's offspring.

Behind the pedestals was a wall adorned with a large fringed throw blanket with a photo of Kramer and Lathrop, along with Kramer's final "paw painting" that looked like a multicolor bouquet.

Nearby was the Daniel J. Donahoe Award that Kramer received in May for his outstanding contribution to youth and families in Chemung County.

Other items on display included boards with newspaper clippings and photos of Kramer, some with him costumed as Santa Claus and others where he wore a tuxedo, black-and-white jailbird stripes or bunny ears.

A table displayed construction-paper sympathy cards created by children.

Also attending Friday's service were Kramer's offspring: Kramer Anderson Jr., Hairy Pawder and Tater Tot.

Kids' best friend passes away
Sheriff's deputy's dog devoted life to helping children cope with problems.
Jim Pfiffer
September 20, 2006



Kramer died the way he lived -- peacefully, when he was ready and with his best friend.

The 9-year-old Rottweiler was euthanized Sunday after battling throat cancer.

We rarely write dog obituaries, but Kramer wasn't a typical canine.

Kramer was famous. That's why he's getting a public service at Olthof Funeral Home in Southport. Plenty of people want to pay respects and say goodbye.

Kramer was one of those dogs everybody loved. Couldn't help it. He lived to be loved.

Most of that love came from teens at Broadway Middle School in Southport. That's where Kramer's owner, Juli Lathrop, discovered the K-man's charm.

Juli is a Chemung County sheriff's deputy. She brought Kramer to Broadway seven years ago when she became the school resource officer.

"I figured it would make me and my uniform more approachable," Juli explains. "I thought it would get the kids to talk to me."

It did. But they did more than chat.

They told secrets they never told anyone. They spoke of sexual and physical abuse, abandonment and thoughts of suicide.

In Kramer they had found someone who didn't judge or poke fun. He didn't care if you were rich, poor, black or white.

He just listened, with his big head nestled in a kid's lap while they talked. He liked everyone.

"I've seen kids break down and cry while they talked to him, while they held him and poured out tales of horror ... things they would not disclose to humans for fear of retribution," Juli explains.

That's what started the Kramer (K-9s Representing Alternative Modern Educational Resources) Program.

The 7-year-old program uses dogs, including Kramer's offspring, in kids' therapy and education.

enlarge photo ⊕



Star-Gazette file photo
Kramer, shown here in a March 2000 photo, was Chemung County Sheriff's Deputy Juli Lathrop's partner in her job as resource officer at Broadway Middle School. Kramer was euthanized Sunday after a 6-month battle with throat cancer.

Say goodbye to Kramer

•Services: 4 to 6 p.m., Friday, Olthof Funeral Home, Southport; followed by eulogy and balloon launch.

•Donations: Kramer Foundation, 436 Middle Road, Horseheads, NY 14845 or The Community Foundation of the Elmira-Corning Area Inc., 307B E. Water St., Elmira, NY 14901.

•Information: 607/735-3324

It started with Kramer. He could melt any kid's tough-guy facade. Boundaries disappeared. The truth came out.

He made everyone feel equal. He taught morals and values, helped kids stay in school and probably saved lives.

That's one special dog.

He has a special owner. Juli doesn't just love animals. They are her life. Have been since she was a kid, growing up with five siblings in Breesport and raising horses, dogs and cats.

As an adult, she moved to a rural town of Veteran home to have room for all the dogs and animals she has raised and rescued.

She rescued Kramer from a bad home. He was a skinny and frightened 18-month-old sack of skin and ribs when he came into Juli's life in 1998.

Rottweilers have a bad rap of being vicious and violent. Not Kramer. It's not the breed of dog. It's how they're raised.

Kramer never bit or snapped at anyone. He let kids sit and climb on him, tugging at his ears, fur and tail. He knew they were just playing.

Kramer had patience and personality.

Juli had the love and dedication to teach him how to share those attributes.

"He doesn't do any tricks," Juli says. "He just loves."

There was nothing like a big slobbery Kramer kiss to let you know you're loved -- a lick of adoration that left kids giggling for more.

That's why so many of them wanted to spend time with Kramer. He had status.

"The kids called him 'The Man', " Julie explains. "Because he's Kramer. He's The Man."

Kids who couldn't or didn't want to read, loved sitting and reading to The Man. He didn't make fun of their stuttering. Never called them stupid.

Kids who improved their grades, came to school every day and stayed out of trouble could take Kramer for a walk, brush him or sit with him on the bench in front of school. The cat's meow.

Kramer shared his charms in group homes, nursing homes and counseling agencies.

He walked in parades, appeared at Easter egg hunts, dances and Halloween festivals.

The kids formed "Team Kramer" year after year and raised more than \$30,000 for local animal shelters, charities and disease cure research.

Kramer worked 12- to 14- hour days. He was always excited about getting into Juli's patrol car the next morning to do it all over again.

He loved car rides, chasing the vacuum cleaner, playing catch and busting balloons.

Then he got sick in March -- diagnosed with inoperable throat cancer.

The vet said he had a few months left. But K-man hung on.

He lost weight, had trouble getting around and started throwing up. Julie tended to him, feeding him boiled chicken -- one of the few foods he could keep down.

As Kramer got sicker, Juli turned the living room couch into his bed. He had always slept on the floor next to Juli's bed.

As he grew worse, Juli knew she had to make a heart-wrenching decision -- to put her best friend out of his misery.

"He'll tell me when it's time," she said six months ago.

He told her last Saturday.

"I don't know how to explain it to you," Juli says.

"It was the look on his face. A look of peace. I knew it was time."

That night Juli slept on the couch, with Kramer on the floor next to her.

"He wouldn't leave my side," she explains.

The next day she called the veterinarian to come give Kramer the shot that would end his suffering.

He died under his favorite willow tree where he loved to rest in the cool shade. He died with his head in Juli's lap.

"She gave him the shot and that was it," Juli says. "It was very peaceful."

This one's for you, K-man. You won't be forgotten.

Jim Pfiffer's Real Life column about people, places and life in the Twin Tiers appears Wednesdays and Fridays. You can reach him by e-mail: jpffier@stargazette.com.