

Fred the PREPAREDNESS Dog

A special canine helps Homeland Security educate children and adults about disaster preparedness

BY MARGIE CARR, A FREELANCE WRITER IN LAWRENCE, KAN.

In September of 2012, right after her dog's first birthday, Rachel McNulty found her German Shepherd, Fred, taking a nap in his bathtub. Rachel snapped a picture, perhaps thinking that the image would be a nice addition to their family album. Her husband, Michael, had a different response. "I first thought that this is a dog who must have done some preparedness training," he says, "because he was a dog seeking shelter."

The rest, as they say, is history.

Michael McNulty, as Director of Homeland Security Operations for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, has been working with preparedness training for more than a decade, teaching people how to be safe during an emergency. And the bathtub is safe refuge during a tornado.

The image of Fred seeking shelter was just the beginning, and since that day Fred, equipped with his emergency backpack, activity books, and outreach materials, has been teaching children and families ways to be prepared in the event of an emergency. "It's the same message," says McNulty. "Just a different messenger."

Not just a different messenger, but a modern way of delivering that message. In addition to the trading cards and coloring books, which share information about emergency preparedness, Fred has his own email, Facebook page, and Twitter account, and he has followers from as far away as China.

Fred the teacher

One of McNulty's favorite images is of Fred wearing his full-face motorcycle helmet. "We recommend children put on helmets (during a tornado warning)



Michael McNulty has discovered advantages working with his dog Fred. "It's a challenge to get—and keep—kids' attention," he says. With Fred, that part of his job is a lot easier.

because it can protect your head from flying debris, so we have this great picture of Fred with his big nose sticking out of the helmet," he says. "And it is just strange enough to get people to click on it because they want to know what it is all about."

While Fred is savvy with social media, he's also effective in person, and during the past year he has met with more than 2,000 people at fairs, schools, and community events. "He's just the right size to give kids licks in the face if they want them," says McNulty, who adds that sometimes he must remind people that Fred is a real dog. "He's not someone in a costume like McGruff the Crime Dog or Smoky the Bear, so when I get scheduled to go somewhere I want them to know I am bringing a real canine."

And because he is a real dog, perhaps his messages are more meaningful to his audience. "When I talk to school groups about having a disaster kit ready in the event of a real emergency, I challenge them to think about what they would put in Fred's kit."

The kids leave not only thinking about their own emergency kits, but what they would have ready for their dogs or cats. "Pets are a part of families and we have to think about their needs during emergencies too," says McNulty.

A future for Fred

Although Fred has been on the job only a year, McNulty knows the possibilities with him are endless. When a woman was bitten by a poisonous snake at a nearby lake, McNulty posted photos of Fred "learning" about poisonous snakes native to the area. McNulty is also hoping he'll be able to teach Fred how to crawl. "Fred is such a smart dog, and it keeps his mind engaged when I teach him something new," he says. "And getting him to crawl will show kids how to move during fires."

McNulty understands that he is in a unique position, sharing his life with a pet like Fred. He also realizes that having his canine companion has broadened the scope of his message. Fred helps him build a culture of preparedness to make better citizens.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL MCNULTY