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Gwinnett Opinions: K-9 officer Cisco goes to reward after fine service

It is with a sad heart that I announce that on Friday **K-9 Cisco** was put to rest.

Over the years, **Cisco** was pictured alongside numerous groups of children in local newspapers, including The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. I collected those pictures and will cherish the memories they provide. I was lucky to have raised **Cisco** from when he was 7 weeks old. I cuddled him in my arms and knew he would be something special.

I trained and handled him as a police dog. I watched him grow from a clumsy and comical puppy to a formidable crime fighter, to an old, kind, loving friend.

Cisco had boundless energy, nerves of steel, and a "never quit" attitude. He was hard and courageous, and he knew it! **K-9** trainers from around the United States and Europe all gave testimony to **Cisco's** big heart.

I remember **Cisco's** first attempt at catching a bad guy as if it were yesterday. On a cool evening around 10 p.m., Lawrenceville police conducted a traffic stop. The driver fled on foot, and they requested a canine.

When we arrived, Gwinnett County Police Sgt. Spanky Davis gave me the words I had been waiting to hear, "Harness up **Cisco**, we've got a bad guy to catch."

I took **Cisco** to where the suspect was last seen. Immediately, my big, powerful partner threw his head up and started air-scenting a woodline. He pulled into the woods, made a long sweeping turn to the left, traveled some distance and began to bark as we approached the suspect. Nothing can describe what an incredible feeling it was to be working my **Cisco**! This was the first of many adventures we went on.

K-9 Cisco fell easily into the role of police dog; catching suspects wanted for kidnapping, armed robbery, aggravated assault, among other charges. He had a unique style of tracking -- he RAN! This quickly led me to coin the phrase "Fading Light Syndrome," caused by **Cisco** leaving our back-up **officers** way behind with their flashlights slowly fading out of sight.

K-9 Cisco helped capture criminals for about every agency in and around Gwinnett, Barrow and Walton County. He retired from active duty with the Gwinnett County Police Department in 1999 and continued to serve as an ambassador by conducting dozens of demonstrations for parades, events, and organizations.

In 2000 when I took a position as a **K-9** handler for the city of Lawrenceville's police, **Cisco** continued his role educating the public of the value of a police dog. Thousands of school children over the years were given puppy kisses by my four-legged partner. He also helped educate more than 1,000 psychology students at Georgia Perimeter College about learning theories. He was a regular guest at special events of the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce.

In 2003, **K-9** Bojar of the Lawrenceville Police Department was on sick leave, so I called upon **Cisco** once again to work the streets. For a few shifts my old man rode shotgun, and we loved every minute of it! One night, an **officer** confronted two vandals who fled on foot. **Cisco** followed the scent, and my heart pounded as I once again had the pleasure of being behind **Cisco** as he tracked down the suspects. It would be **Cisco's** last call as a police dog.

As he grew older, our public appearances declined. He spent more and more time sleeping. To keep his spirits up, I took him out occasionally for practice, but I noticed that he tired quickly and took a long time to recover. **Cisco's** last public appearance was earlier this year. His old age and hard work habits finally caught up with him. In May, **Cisco's** health started to decline. We had to help him up the stairs and catch him as he came down. Weeks later, he needed help just to walk. In his last few days, he could not stand on his own.

As I helped him outside, I saw, for the first time, a look of fear in his piercing, brown eyes. I knew it must be devastating for a dog who was once so strong, powerful and fearless to now be scared. I had long ago made a promise to us both that I would never let him be scared.

On Friday, I contacted **Officer** Dave Russell of the Lawrenceville Police Department and asked him to take us to the veterinarian's office. I had the heartbreaking task of telling my kids that **Cisco** would not be coming home; that the vet was going to give him some medicine to help him sleep, and when he woke up he would be in heaven.

It was only fitting that I put on my uniform, along with a T-shirt bearing his name and the Gwinnett County logo. The trip was short, and **Cisco** rested until we got into Lawrenceville. I helped him up and supported him as he looked out the window and watched the cars go past. Dave and I chuckled as he loudly barked at a person walking from their car.

Sgt. Davis and Gwinnett Police **officers** Rick and Denise Garner and John Surowiec met Dave and I as we got to the animal clinic. They were with me when I held my dear partner in my arms as he took his last breath.

With a kiss on the muzzle, a pat on the head and the words "I love you, old dog," my **Cisco** was off to Doggy Heaven.

Cisco would have celebrated his 15th birthday on Halloween. He was an integral part of my family and community. He helped raise my children, watched over my family while I went to work, vacationed with us and was a neighborhood friend to all the residents in our subdivision.

He is already missed.

I want to thank the AJC for all the memories that you captured in your newspaper, and thank the fine citizens of metro Atlanta who took the time to know **K-9 Cisco**.

K-9 Cisco will be given a police dog funeral in the Garden of Honor at Oak Rest Pet Gardens off Harbins Road today at 1 p.m. The public is welcome to attend.

Thank you for the grand adventure, **Cisco**. Until we meet again, may you always run fast, bite hard and fear nothing.

- Emory Griffith is an **officer** with the Lawrenceville Police Department. He and his family live in Winder.

Photo

Emory Griffith's partner, **Cisco**, will be given a police dog funeral in the Garden of Honor at Oak Rest Pet Gardens off Harbins Road today at 1 p.m. The public is welcome.