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Kachi prowls a FEMA training site during a search simulation at Conco Quarries in Willard. Task force members convened at the site to test the skills of fledgling search dogs.

Search dogs put through paces

Handlers bring their animals together at FEMA training site.

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Despite high-tech tools such as fiber-optic cameras and seismic listening devices, urban search and rescue is still a dog's world.

"They're the front line," said Rick Klein, a logistics manager for Nebraska Task



Klein

Force 1, one of 28 Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The Nebraska team and others, such as Missouri Task Force 1 based in Boone County, are

among the first called to disaster sites such as the World Trade Center.

With noses for locating still-living victims buried beneath the rubble, specially trained

search dogs allow their human partners to quickly home in on the best places to dig for survivors, Klein said. Some are so determined, "they'll actually start trying to dig a victim out."

On Saturday, members of the Nebraska and Missouri task forces teamed up at the FEMA training



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Tina Shaw (right) talks with Lee Turner as she prepares to let her dog Taeryn off the leash for a test on Saturday.

site at Conco Quarries in Willard to test the skills of up-and-coming search dogs and their handlers.

"I think my dog was great. I think I passed," said Tina Shaw, a Springfield, Ill., firefighter who is a member of Missouri

Task Force 1 and one of nine handlers testing Saturday.

Taeryn, Shaw's energetic 4-year-old Belgian Malinois, completed his initial Functional Skills

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Animals must be of mild disposition to qualify

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Assessment by successfully locating both of the human volunteers hiding in a massive pile of rubble meant to simulate the look, sound, smell and feel of a collapsed building.

Shaw gave her furry partner all the credit.

"It's the dog that does the job," she said. "I have to be his brakes and his brain."

Taeryn is the first working dog Shaw has trained, and she hopes to have him fully certified by October or November.

Shaw said she became interested in search and rescue after Sept. 11 — she wanted to lend a

hand, but her skills as a firefighter were not in demand.

"They had enough people with those skills — they didn't need what I could do," she said.

THE RIGHT TEMPERAMENT

Klein, the logistics manager from Nebraska, said the assessment process helps ensure a dog is "on target," so task force members responding to a disaster site don't waste time digging in the wrong location.

"If they alert on a place where there's no victim, they fail the test," he said.

Dogs must be energetic, agile and determined, but also display a lack of aggression, he said. "Be-

cause we're working around a lot of people (at a typical disaster site)."

Golden retrievers, Belgian Malinois, Australian shepherds and Labrador retrievers of all types are the most common breeds trained as urban search and rescue dogs, Klein said, but even bull dogs and pit bulls are used occasionally.

Training can require handlers to travel to sites all across the nation — Shaw said she's logged more than 65,000 miles in the past two years — but the Willard site provides the Nebraska and Missouri teams with a relatively close place to test and train.

"There's a lot of task forces

across the nation that don't have anything like this," Klein said.

Conco has volunteered use of the training site near its quarry for the past 10 years.

"We're happy to have them," said Jacci Gamble, assistant director of quarry operations.

To keep the dogs from learning the site and operating on memory, Conco employees periodically "stir up" the mass of boulders, concrete culverts and rusted ductwork into new configurations.

"We get out here with the loaders and move it all around for them on a pretty regular basis," she said.



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Amy Rising (left) holds onto her dog Justin Case while consulting with Lee Turner before the dog runs through a simulation.