

Rescue dogs responsible for miracles in Mexico

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SANTA CRUZ — Amid the rubble, there have been miracles in Mexico City. Days after the earthquake, rescue teams with search dogs are finding scattered survivors in the flattened buildings.

Two local women, members of the California Rescue Dog Association, have been part of the rescue effort in the city. Saxon Johnson of Watsonville and Debbie Grundherr of Santa Cruz returned with their dogs Tuesday night, after working for four days as part of the Swiss disaster team.

Dog teams have found nine people alive, hidden from sight and hearing by tons of concrete, and have recovered more than 100 bodies from the wreckage.

"They were finding people yesterday, and I think they'll be finding people today and maybe even tomorrow," Johnson said. "We saw a lot of miracles there."

At least five countries have sent dog teams to Mexico. Switzerland, Germany, Italy and France each had 12 teams working in the city, Grundherr said. (A team consists of a dog and a handler.) Soon after Grundherr and Johnson arrived in Mexico City, the United States sent helicopters



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Saxon Johnson and her rescue dog

and five teams, and as many as nine more have followed.

The women were ready to head to Mexico City with their dogs the day of the earthquake, but couldn't get out of the United

States until Friday. They ended up joining the Swiss group when they couldn't get the help they needed from the United States government.

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Remembering the fruitless scramble for transportation into Mexico, Johnson said, "(The Swiss) government supports the dog rescue teams, and our government doesn't. Maybe they do philosophically, but certainly not financially."

A private pilot flew the two women to Los Angeles Friday, and Aeromexico Airlines took them on to Mexico City.

CARDA is a charitable, non-profit organization of volunteers, with about 10 dogs in California trained for disaster rescue work. They train their dogs according to Swiss standards, Johnson said, because "the Swiss are the best in the world at this."

She and Grundherr have been involved in rescue work for about four years. Their dogs first put their training to work during the disastrous storm of 1982 in the Love Creek landslide. The dogs found four bodies buried in the mud.

In mudslides and crumbled buildings, the technique is the same. The dogs sniff over the area, and bark and dig when they pick up a scent.

In Mexico City, a group leader would investigate a building before bringing a team in, to make sure that the building was stable enough to enter — and

stable enough for rescue work if survivors were found.

The teams "risk their lives, no doubt about it," Johnson said, "but not unnecessarily."

Both Johnson and Grundherr remember survivors that the rescuers couldn't help.

Four people that workers were unable to extricate burned to death. Others known to be alive are doomed in buildings that are too unstable to permit any attempt to get them out. The government is discussing razing some of the most dangerous buildings, even though people are presumed — or known — to survive inside. "It's God awful," Johnson said.

But "we saw a lot of miracles there," Johnson said, remembering a woman pulled alive from an impossibly flat building. One survivor, she added, told of a protected area in a collapsed building, big enough to walk around in, where people were waiting for help.

Johnson and Grundherr returned home Tuesday, the dogs too exhausted for more rescue work. They welcome donations to defray the costs of their trip. Donations last year sent Johnson to a training symposium in Switzerland. "I want the people of Santa Cruz to know that their money was well spent," Johnson said.