

Outstanding in His Field

California shelter's captain wins Animal Control Employee of the Year



Jeff Christner shot this photo of the massive natural gas explosion and fire in September 2010 in San Bruno, Calif., about 20 minutes after it erupted. The disaster destroyed 38 homes and killed eight people; Christner's help during the event was cited in his nomination letter for the 2011 Animal Control Employee of the Year.

PEOPLE POWER BY JIM BAKER

Jeff Christner's idea of a great leader is George S. Patton, the colorful, four-star general during World War II.

It's not because Patton wore ivory-handled, Colt .45 revolvers, or because he was known to slap shell-shocked soldiers on occasion.

Christner—captain of the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA's animal rescue and control and humane investigation departments—subscribes to one of Patton's views on leadership: "Always do everything you ask of those you command."

"He wouldn't tell anybody to do anything that he wouldn't do himself," says Christner, who's worked at the San Mateo, Calif., shelter for nine years.

Christner's taken that ethic to heart. Whether it's being the first one through the door at a hoarder's house, or putting himself into a risky position during a complicated effort to rescue a horse whose hind legs had fallen through the deck of a bridge, he's always ready to take the lead.

On Sept. 9, 2010, there was a natural gas pipeline explosion in San Bruno's Crestmoor neighborhood, two miles west of San Francisco International Airport. The catastrophe killed eight people and destroyed 38 homes.

Christner, who lives about five miles from the scene, was the first person from his departments to respond, after he received a frantic call from one of his investigators.

He had just gotten home from working a 10-hour day, but he raced to the fire, and set up an operations center for responders from his

shelter. "I think I worked 17 ½ hours [straight], all told," Christner says. He and his staff then worked through the weekend, rescuing the few pets they could, and sheltering others.

That kind of leadership inspired his staff to nominate Christner for the National Animal Control Association's (NACA) 2011 Animal Control Employee of the Year Award. They kept the nomination a secret; humane officer Chris Wilson wrote the nominating letter.

Christner, 42, didn't know anything about it until he received a letter from NACA saying he'd won. Then his 20-member staff finally 'fessed up, and the news quickly spread through the organization. "Jeff absolutely, 100 percent deserves this award, and we are all proud that he got it," Wilson says.

He received the award in May at NACA's annual conference in Reno, Nev.



Wildlife technicians Patrick Hogan and Marisa Burman and Christner (right) from the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA give subcutaneous fluids to a fawn who was abandoned by the mother and brought to the shelter by animal control officers.

The award is more than just the recognition of Christner's work and reputation, according to Scott Delucchi, the Peninsula Humane Society's vice president for community relations. "It's also great for the shelter, and for the people in this community, to know that we have folks who have been recognized nationally," he says.

Jamie McAloon Lampman, director of the Ingham County Animal Control Shelter in Mason, Mich., is one of three NACA board members who served on the selection committee for the awards given this year.

The letter nominating Christner impressed the committee, according to Lampman. It described how he always tries to improve his entire department, not just himself, by helping staff to get as much training as possible; his willingness to embrace innovative ideas; and his support during stressful times.

"He was a wonderful candidate, because he was professional, he was compassionate, and he was a leader—and a well-liked leader, so that's pretty exemplary," Lampman says.

Christner downplays getting the NACA honor, saying that the efforts of so many



Christner is known as a leader who'd never ask a colleague to do something that he wouldn't do himself—for example, rappelling 200 feet down a cliff to rescue a fallen dog, as he was preparing to do when this shot was taken.

people in animal control go largely unrecognized. "I know that there's just as many people out there that probably work just as hard and probably did more with less, quite honestly, than what we've managed to do here," he says.

Before Christner started as an animal control officer in 2002 at his shelter, he had no formal experience in the field. The Cleveland native had worked for years as a freight train conductor and in industrial shipping-and-receiving jobs, but he'd always felt pulled toward caring for animals.

He served in the Air Force from 1987 to 1991, performing aircraft radio maintenance at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. During the first Gulf War, many airmen were shipped overseas, so he was pressed into service as a military policeman for about six months.

That's how he got his first taste of law enforcement, but it wasn't quite his niche. Years later, when he was considering a move to California, he came across a job listing on the Internet for a position at the Peninsula Humane Society.

"It just seemed to be the perfect fit. ... I was like, 'Wow, animal control—I can do that,'" Christner says.

Even though he was embarking on a totally different career path, it didn't take long for him to feel at home in the field. In fact, Christner knew he would like being an animal control officer even before he was offered the job—he sensed it after a ride-along with an officer.

The day started with an aggressive dog call—the dog had to be tranquilized before the officer could load the animal onto his truck—and ended with something more unusual.

"We're in the San Francisco Bay Area—let's leave it at that. There's people who were giving a prayer ceremony over a deceased deer that we had to pick up off their property," Christner says.

"After we got back into the truck, I just kind of looked at [the animal control officer], and she goes, 'That doesn't happen all the time,'" he says, laughing. "It was just such a variety of different types of calls—it was a pretty amazing day." *AS*

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