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## BUG HUNTER

Paul Forsyth/Metroland

Susan Wall of Niagara Falls and her bed bug-hunting dog Mercy are working as a team to track down the elusive insects that feed on people at night. Mercy was at one point just hours away from being euthanized at a shelter in the United States. See story on Page 6.

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# DOG ESCAPES DEATH ROW TO BECOME EXPERT BED BUG HUNTER

**DUTCH SHEPHERD MERCY USES HIGH ENERGY TO TRACK DOWN BLOODSUCKERS**

PAUL FORSYTH  
pforsyth@niagarathisweek.com

Mercy can do better than find a needle in a haystack: she can find something barely bigger than the head of a needle just about anywhere it's hidden.

She can find elusive bed bugs, even their tiny eggs, with her extremely talented and sensitive nose.

At a time when service dogs have been specially trained to do everything from guiding blind people and detecting oncoming seizures, to helping people with psychiatric conditions and detecting drugs or explosives, Susan Wall's dog has a special gift for finding where bloodsucking bed bugs are hiding in mattresses, furniture or various other places in homes, hotel rooms, long-term care homes and everywhere else they can infect.

The Niagara Falls resident, who has worked in management positions in the hotel industry for decades and who has seen the explosion of bed bug infestations in Canada, is a volunteer with the city's humane society and met a high-energy, six-month-old Dutch shepherd at the shelter 1½ years ago.

The dog's name is appropriate: Mercy was, at one point, scheduled to be euthanized within hours in a shelter in the United States, due to her excitable nature that led her to bite several people, said Wall.

"She was clearly impulsive and



Mercy the Dutch shepherd is all business as owner Susan Wall prepares to unleash her on a hunt for bed bug pheromones hidden in a large room. The dog found the tiny container in mere seconds.

Paul Forsyth/Metroland

often fearful due to ... mishandling of such a high-energy pup," she said. At the 11th hour, the shelter spared the dog's life, and Mercy ended up a rescue dog in the local humane society.

"She was crazy when I got her - leaping off walls," said Wall.

Wall took her home and spent months training and socializing the dog. She enlisted the help of two trainers, who put Mercy's boundless energy to good use by training her to detect bed bugs - at first with live bugs hidden in jars, then with bed bug pheromones

produced by a lab in Markham.

The result is astounding: Mercy lavishes attention on anyone, even total strangers.

"She loves everybody," said Wall.

Now a well-balanced dog, Mercy has also mastered hunting bed bugs. In a demonstration in a large room with multiple tables, the dog was easily able to root out a salt shaker that held cotton padding on which a tiny drop of bed bug pheromone had been placed.

Mercy instantly sat down, stone still - alerting her handler that

she's detected her prey.

Wall said Mercy's breed needs to be challenged to complete tasks, like any working dogs.

"They have a very high drive," she said, one reason why they're often used for scent detection by police and border guards. "They have to have a job."

Wall has launched a new venture, No Mercy Bed Bug Detection, working with her dog to search for bugs in such places as hotel rooms, long-term care homes, and used furniture stores.

"Bed bugs are everywhere,"

Wall said. "It's a huge problem."

College dorms in Canada have been infected, Montreal's largest library had an outbreak over the summer, and even British Airways issued an apology to a Canadian family plagued by the bugs on a flight to London last year.

Like lice once were, bed bugs still have a stubborn stigma that fosters misconceptions that it has to with being dirty or poor, said Wall. But even high-end hotels and theatres can be plagued by them, she said.

"It doesn't discriminate," said Wall. "People have to lose that stigma."

Because they're tiny, are good at avoiding detection and feed on sleeping humans, populations can go unchecked, said pest control company Orkin.

Wall wants hotels, nursing homes, furniture-recycling stores and homeowners to be proactive in catching bed bugs before populations get out of hand.

"The whole purpose is to stop the infestation," she said. "You could have a huge infestation before somebody reacts and reports it."

Wall, who hopes to one day open a facility to take in troubled dogs for rehabilitation and possibly senior dogs to live out their golden years - because people often shy away from adopting old dogs - said it's a joy to see Mercy's excitement and satisfaction at getting to do her work hunting bugs.

"She just blows my mind," she said. "As a rescue dog, she's come a long, long way."

"She is the sweetest thing ever."

Wall can be reached at 905-380-3161 or by email at susan-wall484@hotmail.com.

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