

NAKODA

by Marianne Pope

Nakoda, the light-grey radio-collared wolf my husband John and I sponsored for three years, was an excellent alpha female and produced many pups over the years. She kept them safe and did not engage in killing cattle. At one hundred pounds and over six feet in length, Nakoda was large for a female, and demonstrated great leadership qualities that were imperative to the pack's success, including waiting at the road edge for pack members to cross as if on 'look-out' duty for vehicles. There was not a single recorded death of Nakoda's pups on any of the roads through the pack's territory.

One sunny day in early September of 2000, she'd been sighted in a meadow in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park with her pack, all lounging in the warm, early autumn weather. One of her pups rose from its resting place, walked towards its mother, now looking very white with age, and nuzzled her. Then one wolf howled, which soon developed into a chorus, and afterwards all the wolves got up and had a 'gathering' where everyone touched noses and wagged tails. This special creature was to play an unexpected part in my life in days to come.

On September 29, 2000 I was a report processor for the same police service where John was a police officer. I had just arrived at work for my first shift back after our vacation, when my supervisor asked me to come into her office. I figured I must have made a mistake on a report sometime before I left on our vacation.

She shut the door. "John's fallen."

Perhaps a broken leg or arm. The thought flitted into my mind and out again.

"You have to call his inspector right away."

I was puzzled as to why an officer with the rank of inspector wanted to speak to me; inspectors don't phone in incident reports. I sat down at my supervisor's desk and picked up the phone before finally making the connection between John's inspector and John's fall. This wasn't about a report.

"Hi," I said when an older male voice answered the phone.

"Is this Marianne?"

"Yeah."

"John's been in an accident."

"Oh."

"Where are you right now?"

"At work."

"Is your supervisor with you?"

"Yeah."

"OK, listen to me. John's hit his head and we're on the way to pick you up."

... "HIS HEAD?"

The room felt different – as if the air was being sucked out.

"Yes. He's at the hospital and we're going to take you to him."



Oh God no.

My supervisor took my arm and led me from the office to the back alley, where the inspector and John's sergeant picked me up in the police van. En route to the hospital I asked his sergeant what had happened.

"He was investigating a break and enter when he fell through a false ceiling."

"I see." I looked out the window. "Where are we going?"

"The hospital."

I turned to him. "But which one?"

He said John was at the hospital in the northwest part of the city. But John worked and lived in the south.

"Why didn't they take him to the hospital in the south?" I asked.

"Because he went to the best trauma unit in the city."

Clunk. Like a coin hitting the bottom of an empty piggybank, the seriousness of John's injury hit me. You don't usually make it home for dinner when your day starts in a trauma unit.

"You know," I said, "we had a great vacation."

At Emergency, we were directed to a room where John's team was waiting. I chose a seat beside the only policewoman on his team and asked her what happened.

"We went to a break and enter. John went inside with the K-9 officer and his dog. John was searching the upper level when he stepped through the ceiling."

"He's gonna be okay, though, right?"

"I don't know," she said. "He really hit the back of his head hard."

Because the K-9 officer had successfully resuscitated him, John was kept on life support. This meant that he would be able to donate his heart, kidneys and pancreatic islets. It also meant that I could spend the day with him, holding his hand and comforting him as best I could as he succumbed to brain injuries. Although becoming a police officer had been his lifelong dream, John always said that coming home to me at the end of every shift was his top priority. So what went wrong?

Just after midnight, my brother drove me home. As he pulled alongside our house, my stomach was in knots. How was I going to face, without John, all that represented our life together? Inside the back door, I was enthusiastically greeted by our dog, Sable. I knelt down on the floor and hugged her tightly, our family of three reduced to two.



Two heart-wrenching months passed and in early November, I was flipping through my mail and came across an envelope from the wolf conservation organization John and I belonged to. Thinking that reading about Nakoda, might cheer me up, I opened the envelope.

Nope. A hunter had shot her on September 22nd – the day John and I had been at Disneyland, one week before his death. The shooting was legal. Through my tears, I read how the nine-year old alpha female of the Peter Loughheed pack had been sighted outside the small, protected area allotted to wolves. Since the hunter hadn't noticed her collar, identifying her off limits for hunting, he'd shot her. For several weeks, her pups and pack-mates had repeatedly returned to the den site, either searching for her or grieving her death.

Later in November, I went for lunch with the policewoman from John's team and she told me the details of their shift, including a comment John had made several hours before he fell.

"We were doing a traffic stop," she said, "and a truck had barreled past us. I made a comment about how dangerous it is working on the side of the road, so John told me about the time he was sitting in his police car, lights activated, and had glanced in his rearview mirror to see a semi flying up behind him. He said it was the strangest sensation thinking he was going to die."



In April 2001, I met with three classmates from John's recruit class. They'd had a pin made in John's memory and raised over \$12,000 for the John Petropoulos Memorial Fund. Because John died as the result of a preventable workplace injury – there was no safety railing in place to warn him about the

false ceiling – we decided to create a public service announcement (PSA) to educate the public about workplace safety.

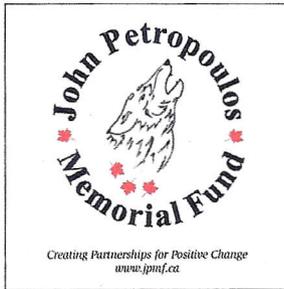
But we needed a symbol for the memorial fund... something that would represent what John stood for – leadership, integrity, honour, courage, dedication and a commitment to excellence.

A few weeks later, while on a flight to Vancouver, I found it. I was recalling the qualities we'd come up with to describe John, and Nakoda came to mind. What about wolves had intrigued us? I wrote down the word 'wolf' and circled it.

"Why did you write that?" asked a voice beside me.

I turned to see a teenage girl.

cont. page 18 ➤



“Pardon me?”
She held up a wolf pendant on her necklace. “The wolf is my favourite animal.”

“Oh. I was just thinking about the kind of characteristics that wolves have...”

“Let’s see,” she said, “they’re loyal, beautiful and courageous. And they’re

excellent leaders...”

Then from her other side, the girl’s mom leaned forward, adding: “And they’re very calm and wise; it’s almost as if they have an inner spirit. They’re also very opportunistic.”

“But very family oriented and devoted,” said the girl. Then she turned back to me. “Does that help?”

I opened my mouth and closed it again.

“Are you feeling all right?” she asked.

I smiled. “Yeah.”

I asked if she’d mind sketching the wolf on her necklace for me in my notebook. She did so and then handed the notebook back to me but when I went to put it in my knapsack, her necklace fell out.

I handed it back to her. “You forgot this.”

She shook her head. “Oh no... that’s yours now. I want you to have it.”

Although John died after only four years on the job, his contribution to the police service in that short time was exemplary. He gave his life doing work he believed in and through the John Petropoulos Memorial Fund, his commitment to making his community a safer place lives on. Through the safety campaign, ‘**One, is One Too Many**’, the memorial fund educates the public about their role in helping ensure emergency services personnel make it home safely after every shift. The first PSA, **Make Your Workplace Safe for Everyone**, uses John’s death to communicate the importance of making a workplace safe for everyone who may attend the premise, emergency services personnel included.

The second PSA, ‘**SLOW DOWN: It’s No Picnic Out Here**’, is about traffic safety. It educates motorists about the necessity of slowing down when passing emergency services personnel working on the road. These PSAs have aired on TV across Western Canada over 70,000 times, and emergency services, companies and safety organizations throughout North America are using these educational tools in their own communities.

Sadly, since Nakoda’s death the Peter Lougheed pack has dissolved – but perhaps her strength and spirit live on alongside John’s through the memorial fund. **ca**

For more information about the John Petropoulos Memorial Fund, please visit www.jpmpf.ca or e-mail maryanne@jpmpf.ca

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