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FROM NAIROBI TO LIVINGSTON: HOW SVALINN DOGS ARE REDEFINING PERSONAL PROTECTION



Boomer, a fully trained and matured dog, attacks Cullen MacAndrew in the bite suit. Boomer can stop attacking and be pet by MacAndrew at a word from his handler.

Lauren Miller/Chronicle

Kim Greene has never seen her dogs as luxury items.

Before founding Svalinn, a personal-security dog breeding business where her pups sell for over \$150,000, Green lived in Kenya in the early 2000s after serving as a policy adviser to the new Afghan government.

Living with her then-husband, a former Green Beret providing private security to diplomats and NGOs, Greene struggled to feel safe amid Nairobi's carjacking problem and terrorism threats, especially after learning she was pregnant with twins. Not wanting to carry a gun, Greene opted for the next best thing: a pair of Dutch shepherds named Banshee and Briggs.

Her business was originally named "Ridgeback," but Greene rebranded it after encountering confusion due to her new focus on Belgian Malinois and German and Dutch Shepherds. Seeking a name that conveyed strength and power, she chose "Svalinn," inspired by Nordic mythology, where it

represents a shield protecting the world.

However, once she settled in the picturesque Paradise Valley in 2016, success for her “personal protection dogs” was not immediate.

“I keep joking that we’re going to be the 20-year overnight success story,” Greene said.



Kim Greene, the owner of Svalinn, gives love to a dog after they do a good job going through the course. Svalinn's methodology doesn't use treats, toys or domination in training, but instead relies on trust, bonding and mutual respect between the dog and staff member in the training process.

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In the early years of the business in America, Greene and her parents handled most of the work until they found staff eager to learn her unique dog training methodology.

Unlike standard dog training, which relies on food or toys to motivate dogs, Greene's strategy focuses on building a “rapport.”

“We give a command and we praise the command,” she said. “I want the dogs working for our affection and our verbal praise because

we're bonded to them, not because someone's got a sausage in their pocket.”

Greene's strategy starts early, with puppy training beginning at six weeks, once they are vaccinated and introduced to the other dogs. By 10 weeks, the dogs are brought to the Phoenix, an obstacle course resembling a jungle gym with slippery surfaces, swinging tires and narrow balance beams. The course is rearranged daily to prevent the dogs from going on autopilot during training.



Cullen MacAndrew waits to give the cue for the dog to go through the Phoenix course. In addition to agility and obedience training, the dogs also get protection training and socialization, both around other dogs and people, to see how they interact outside of Svalinn.

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Through regular sessions on the Phoenix and keeping the dogs close to nature — using choke collars, feeding them raw meat on the bone, avoiding toys and treats and housing them in a dirt-floor barn shared with upward of 50 other dogs — Greene's methodology aims to maintain their animal nature rather than coddle them.

Similarly, when puppies are born, only a select few staff interact with the mother and newborns. It's survival of the fittest; if complications arise or the mother abandons them, the staff does not intervene.

“Mother Nature is doing what Mother Nature does,” said Josie Gillespie, who has worked at Svalinn for four years and often supervises the puppies.

Gillespie, like most of Svalinn's staff, had no prior experience with dogs before joining the team. She previously worked with hospice patients before seeking a less emotionally exhausting career change.

Greene prefers staff with no prior dog training experience because it's

easier to teach them her methodology and ensure consistent dog training. As long as potential staffers have a strong work ethic and are willing to wear many hats — since dog care is far from a typical nine-to-five job — they are likely to thrive.

This hands-on approach extends to the dogs themselves. All dogs are bred at the ranch, allowing Greene and her staff to know their exact lineage. Although on-site breeding is “cost prohibitive,” it provides full control over the dogs and helps them learn every aspect of their personalities to best pair them with potential owners.

“We know their personalities better than some aunts know their nephews,” Greene said.

Svalinn prioritizes gathering comprehensive data on its dogs — including their socialization with humans



Local meat sits in coolers for the dogs to eat with kibble as their meals. The dogs are all bred in-house to have “a specific mix of the most desirable characteristics from very old bloodlines” and are a mix of German Shepherd, Dutch Shepherd and Belgian Malinois.

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Kim Greene and Josie Gillespie watch as Boomer, a fully trained and matured dog, attacks Cullen MacAndrew in the bite suit. Boomer can stop attacking and be pet by MacAndrew at a word from his handler.

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and other animals — command comprehension and obedience and tolerance for diverse environments like urban or arid regions. By the time the dogs reach two years old and are ready for their forever homes, there are no unknowns.

“If we’re coming to deliver a dog to you, and you’ve got three other dogs, we set that up for success,” Greene said. “We don’t just go ‘Well, let’s hope this goes over well.’ We know everything about the dog and how our dogs are going to behave.”

However, it’s the synthesis of their protective abilities, obedience and stability that, according to Greene, sets her dogs apart from the general population.

“The difference is that we take the natural instincts in our animals and we give them enough structure so that they’re enlightened individuals,” Greene said.

Central to this training is the concept of energy. Greene believes that teaching her dogs to fight off intruders and detect trouble before it happens relies on mastering this crucial element.



Indi Dubay leads a dog through the Phoenix, which is an obstacle course they set up for the dogs. The staff will change it weekly to practice agility and obedience.

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By having staff emote negative energy and emotions while wearing a protective bite suit and handlers emit fear, Greene said an energy transfer occurs between the dog and human that wordlessly instructs the animal to protect its owner.

“Everything we do is based on intentionality,” she said. “It’s not just like there’s a command word, and the dog does it without thinking; dogs are very discerning and thoughtful creatures.... We’re not teaching the dog anything that it doesn’t do naturally, but we’re providing the training backdrop for it to trust in its own natural instincts.”

Greene said all Svalinn dogs are trained to protect their owners and families in virtually any scenario imaginable, from carjackings and assaults to home intruders.

Regarding the current price of \$150,000, Greene plans to increase it to reflect the thousands of hours spent molding the dogs into “good citizens.”

Despite being marketed as “protection dogs,” Greene noted that few owners ever need them to actually protect, as their mere presence often deters potential attackers. In fact, since she began breeding and training dogs, she has only heard of one incident where a dog went into attack mode.

She recounted an incident in Kenya when a U.S. Embassy employee, her husband and their four-year-old were stuck in traffic. The husband had forgotten to lock the car doors, and suddenly, a man wrenched open the door and reached for the child. Greene’s dog, Bolt, sprang into action, leaping across the child seat to subdue the kidnapper, knocking him out of the car before quickly returning.

“We always say that the dog is not only your best friend, but your best protector; it is your guardian angel,” Greene said. “The most important part is the stability and the foundational obedience, because that’s what you use every day. You can’t get to protection work until you’ve got a very obedient dog. Because that dog is only willing to go to the end of the leash and protect you.”

For clientele and potential owners, Svalinn enforces a strict owner vetting policy. Greene described the adoption process, which can take from months to years, as an interview where she and the staff “interview people more than they’re interviewing us.”

Taking home a Svalinn dog requires more than just funds. Potential clients must visit the Livingston ranch to meet with Greene and her staff. After this initial meeting, Greene assesses the clients’ lifestyle and preferences, then creates a list of dogs whose temperaments she believes would best suit them.

Ultimately, the decision on whether a client gets a dog — and which dog they receive — is up to Greene and her staff.

“If someone’s going to invest in a Svalinn dog, we’re going to be in a relationship with them for minimum 10 years. We don’t want to deal with people who can’t take personal responsibility,” she said.

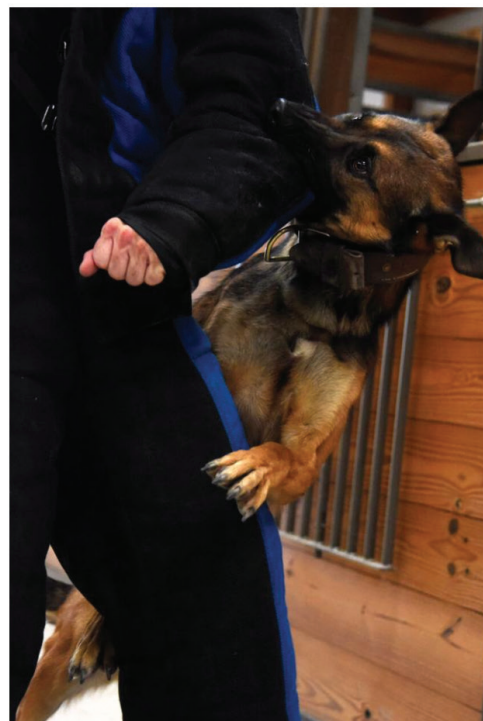
Staff drive the dogs to their new homes, whether down the street in Livingston or across the country in New York City. After the initial introduction, staff make yearly visits to ensure training and protection behaviors are maintained and to refine the owners’ commands.

If owners fail to comply with the post-delivery visits or if the dog is suspected of being mistreated, Svalinn has the contractual right to remove the dog and return it to the ranch. While this has never happened, Greene said it reinforces Svalinn’s mission of matching dogs with the most suitable owners.

“That’s because we’re doing our due diligence at the onset,” she said. “We don’t just sell a dog to someone because they can write a check. It’s a very purposeful system.”

Since 2005, Greene has raised over 400 dogs and can still recall the names of her earliest litter. Despite the physical labor and few days off, she has no plans to stop and takes pride in the growth of the business over the years.

“We’ve been doing what we’ve been doing for a really long time, and we’re good at it,” she said. “We just want to continue doing it really well and providing great dogs to great families who value them.”



Kozlow attacks Cullen MacAndrew as he pretends to be a danger threatening Indi Dubay. Greene says they work with many families who are looking for the “peace of mind” a protection dog can bring.

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Cullen MacAndrew guides puppy Riot while Indi Dubay trains with her litter mate Mayhem around the Phoenix. Every litter had a different theme they were given which is how they got their names.

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