**Episode Title:** Hansel: The Crime - Solving Arson Dog

**Episode Summary:**
Today on Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies, host Karman Hotchkiss sits down with Tyler Van Leer, of the Millville, New Jersey, fire department, to talk about his colleague and bestie, Hansel, a goofy, lovable pit bull who just happens to be an ace arson detection dog. Hansel’s only been at the job for three years, but he’s already helped authorities catch a handful of arsonists in the area. Not bad for a pup who just a few years earlier was facing euthanasia in Canada. His journey to Tyler and his new life is a saga worth listening to.

**Episode Type:** Full  
**Episode Rating:** Clean  
**Season Number:** 1  
**Episode Number:** 2  
**Episode Date:** November 16, 2023

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**Episode Transcript:**

**Music: Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies Theme Music begins**

Karman Hotchkiss (VO):  
Welcome to Warm Fuzzies, a new podcast from Daily Paws. I’m your host, Karman Hotchkiss (a certified cat lady, but don’t tell my dog). We’ll be sharing heartwarming stories that highlight the lives of some very special furry friends. You’ll hear tales of unlikely partnerships, miracle rescues, hero pets and more.

On today’s show, we’re chatting with Tyler Van Leer, fire marshall with the Millville, New Jersey fire department. Millville is located on the southern tip of NJ, and Tyler, who was born and raised there, is here to talk to us about a very special member of his team: Hansel, an adorable pit bull who also happens to be the department’s crackerjack arson detection dog. Hansel—yes, he’s named after the fairy tale—actually detects accelerants used in arson—you know, things like gasoline or lighter fluid. He is the FIRST pit bull to be certified in arson detection in the country. Yay Hansel! He is also Tyler’s and the department’s first “working dog”—meaning Hansel’s on the clock like the rest of the department—but the two have a bond as deep as it goes when a furry pal and their human find each other. How they got there, is an extraordinary tale. Just listen…
Karman Hotchkiss:
Welcome to Warm Fuzzies. I'm Karman Hotchkiss, and we have with us today Fire Marshall Van Leer. So welcome, we're so happy to have you here and to, to hear about you and your four-legged partner. Would you like to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about where you work and what you do?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
Sure. Thank you, Karman, for having me on here. It's a tremendous opportunity. I enjoy talking about my little guy, uh, K-9 Hansel. My name is Tyler, as you stated, I work for the Millville Fire Department in Millville, New Jersey. I've been on the job for 11 years, um, so going on my 12th year with the fire department. Being a fireman, it's, uh, the best job in the world. I wouldn't ask for a better career. And now that I have Hansel, it's really, really kicked it into the next level.

Karman Hotchkiss:
How long have you and Hansel been partners?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
So January of 2024, we will be a certified team for four years.

Karman Hotchkiss:
That's a nice long partnership.

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
It is. Yeah.

Karman Hotchkiss:
When did you meet Hansel?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
Right. So that's a very good question. So, uh, to any successful K-9 team, you have to establish a bond. So the bond occurred September of 2019. Hansel was brought to the fire department and we conducted a meet and greet to see if Hansel would take to me and I would take to him. As soon as that little guy jumped out of the car, um, we locked eyes and the bond was instant. It's maybe a little silly, but the best way I can describe it is for those of you who have watched Harry Potter and when he gets his wand and, you know, in the very first movie and everything goes crazy and the wand chooses the wizard kind of thing, I know that's a silly comparison, but that's the best way I can describe it. So the dog chooses the handler, and fortunately, Hansel chose me.
Karman Hotchkiss:
How old was he at that point?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
So I didn't get an exact age on Hansel. When we started the academy, he was supposedly four years old.

Karman Hotchkiss:
And he, if I understand correctly, he'd had a pretty interesting life up to that point? And I, I don't mean that necessarily in a good way.

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
So Hansel, unfortunately, was born into an alleged dog fighting ring in Ontario, Canada. Uh, Hansel did not fight. He was just a tiny baby at the time, uh, along with many other pit bulls. So the dog fighting ring was stopped and the pit bulls were seized. In the province of Ontario, it's illegal to own a pitbull. Most of the time the dogs are just euthanized because they're deemed a danger to society. So, a rescue in Canada called Dog Tales Rescue and Sanctuary got wind of this alleged dog fighting ring, and they went right to work. They started to fight the legal system in Ontario. Uh, like I said, all these dogs were slated for euthanasia within, I want to say two years, they won the fight and the dogs were ordered out of the province of Ontario by the judge. So, Hansel and five others were relocated then to another rescue down to another rescue down in Florida called Dogs Playing for Life. Okay, so this is where Hansel started his transition in life Hansel has tremendous energy. He has tremendous work ethic and the trainers down in Florida saw this potential and they were like, "Why don't we try Hansel in a working dog position? Let's see what he can do." Dog Tales Rescue and Sanctuary and Dogs Playing for Life contacted an organization called Throw Away Dogs Project. This organization was founded by Carol Skaziak, an amazing woman. She takes misunderstood dogs and gives them a second chance in life. So whether it be a pit bull, a German Shepherd, a Belgian Malinois, it doesn't matter the breed. She takes these dogs that are labeled either, you know, "Oh, they're a danger." Or, "This dog has too much energy" and donates them to police departments, fire departments for working dogs. Her mission is tremendous, so they contacted Carol. Carol and her team flew down to Florida to Dogs Playing for Life. She met Hansel and five other pit bulls. Her and her team tested them, and Hansel and the five others passed with flying colors. So, she then made a program called Pit Bulls for Police. This program is meant to donate pit bulls to police departments that would like a K-9, however, cannot afford to buy one, uh, because to get a single purpose K-9, you're looking anywhere at the minimum $6,000. That's the bare minimum. Some departments just don't have the funding to get the dog. So that's where Carol Skaziak of Throw Away Dogs project comes in and she fills that void. She contacts police departments or people contact her either police chiefs, fire chiefs, whatever the case may be. So she accepted Hansel and the five other pit bulls into her Pit Bulls for Police program. And then she started, just networking and reaching out to departments and saying, "Hey, this is what I have to offer you. This is how I can help." So I believe Hansel was the second from the last to be adopted.
Karman Hotchkiss:  
He was waiting for you, right?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:  
He was right. I mean, it's, it's ...

Karman Hotchkiss:  
Fate was putting that together for you.

Fire Marshall Van Leer:  
Correct. Correct. And then, um, so as fate would have it, a very good friend of mine, was a K-9 officer for like 21 years. He knew of Carol and her organization. So, I reached out to him and said, "Hey, this is what the fire department is looking for." So he reached out to Carol and he explained what we were looking for. She just, she knew Hansel was right for this particular job.

Karman Hotchkiss:  
So at that point he was not specifically an arson dog, correct?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:  
So Hansel was in the K-9 world, uh, considered a green dog, so he could have been trained in anything. He could have been trained in narcotic detection. He could have been trained in explosives. Uh, whatever the case may be. So, um, he wasn't considered an arson dog until we graduated the academy.

Karman Hotchkiss:  
What are some of the things that you do in that kind of training to get a dog ready for the kind of work that Hansel does?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:  
Okay. So, the K-9 Academy was 16 weeks long. Um, 16 weeks of scent school. So, from week 1 all the way to week 16, we were imprinting him on different odors that are associated with arson, and we were teaching him, or I should say the trainers were teaching him how to properly pattern a room. Now, when it comes to searching a room, or a vehicle, or an open field, whatever the case may be, there's a certain way you do it so you don't miss anything. Because odor can be anywhere. So you want to make sure that you are searching the room properly or searching the vehicle properly or that open field so you're not missing anything. Hansel's imprinted on 14 different odors from hydrocarbons to acetones to alcohol based accelerants. So the way we imprinted Hansel, we put one drop of accelerant on towels, like hand towels, and we rolled them up and we taped each end. So Hansel is what we call play reward. So what we did was, with the towels, we were playing tug of war. Okay? We had to do 100 towel tosses for him to be imprinted on that odor, and towel tosses was just like playing
fetch, but with a towel instead of a ball. So what that does is, Hansel is associating play with that odor. Okay, so he's like, "Oh, this is great. If I smell this odor, Dad's gonna play with me." So what happened was after the 100th towel toss, we then put that same towel in a room and I walked Hansel into a room and I started a search with him. During scent school, you get to learn how to read your dog, meaning, behavior changes, you get to learn how to properly pattern a room. So, my trainers were teaching me how to do it, and I did it, and they're like, "Okay, watch him, watch his behavior change when he comes up to this odor." So, sure enough, I believe, um, if I remember correctly they hid the towel in a nightstand. And Hansel was sniffing, I mean, I could hear his breathing changes, when he came across that nightstand, his behavior changed. He went from, you know, walking, running, going back and forth to really searching this nightstand. He was not leaving this nightstand. He knew that that odor that he knew was there and then we started and then once we saw that he was recognizing the odor in different locations, then we incorporated the sit. That tells me that there's something here or in that location and then that's how I take samples in a timely manner. It could take me hours, if I didn't have Hansel on a fire scene.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Does he get called out like to every fire? Or are there certain situations where maybe arson is already you know, suspected and then you bring him out? Like, what's the process of him being brought to a site, a work situation?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
That's an excellent question. So it could happen both ways. We're on call 24/7. So a fire could go out 5 minutes from now and we're going. So if arson is already suspected, then, he's going to be deployed well after the fire's out. If the house is too unstable, I most likely won't deploy Hansel because of the safety concern. So he's going to be on scene, but it's my determination if I deploy him or not because if the scene isn't safe for him, I'm not going to deploy him. What I'll do is I'll take certain items out of the house and have him sniff in the front yard as compared to, um, you know, bringing him into a potentially unstable house. Other departments can also request Hansel, um, that are not in the county here. Hansel is a good deterrent. If people see him roll up on a fire scene, they kind of think twice because most arsonists return to the scene, they want to see their work.

Karman Hotchkiss:
And he's good at what he does.

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
Yes ma'am, and I've been told by multiple people that it makes them feel a little bit more safe.

Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies theme music fades in
Karman Hotchkiss (VO): We’re taking a quick break, but when we come back, we’ll hear how Hansel cracked his first big arson case, and boy, was it a doozy. You don’t want to miss this. Be right back!

Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies theme music fades out

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Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies theme music fades in


Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies theme music fades out

Karman Hotchkiss:
Can you tell us about the first time that you took him to a scene and how did that play out?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
Right. So I'll actually tell you a case that we had that really strengthened Hansel's street credibility, his first big case. All right, we had a few large warehouses in the center of town here. It was city-owned property for a very long time. There was no utilities to these buildings. So we thought that the buildings were vacant to the point where there was nothing even in them to burn, but we were mistaken. Unbeknownst to us, the neighboring business owner relocated pallets of glass bottles into the city owned building. So we didn't even know that that even happened. So it was, we just assumed that these buildings were empty. We had a warehouse fire. So immediately, I started thinking this could be a potential criminal act. I was going to deploy Hansel in this warehouse, however, due to all the glass bottles shattering, it was too much of a hazard, however, our local police department said, "Well, when we first showed up, the building behind this warehouse had an orange glow in it as well, but it wasn't on fire when we pulled up." It was, it already put itself out. So I'm like, "Okay, so, we had a large warehouse and a smaller building behind this warehouse." Two potential targets, so one was successful, meaning that the fire reached its fully developed stage, and one was unsuccessful because it put itself out. So what I did was, I deployed Hansel to the smaller building to see if he could pick up anything. So we walked up this vacant building. We walked up the steps and he immediately put his nose to the ground, and he was an odor, meaning that ... He was already recognizing something that he's familiar with. And, I mean, the buildings that were vacant for so long, I mean, there's vegetation growing in these buildings. I mean, there's literally nothing that could have caused a fire besides some kind of human intervention. Okay? It's not like an outlet started this fire. There's no utilities. There's nothing. So Hansel immediately got an odor. He sat. I took
samples, and I sent him off to the New Jersey State Police lab because each sample has to be analyzed and confirmed before they could be submitted in the court of law, because we have to make sure that he's indicating properly. So, the results came back as lighter fluid and then, I had the report up and I attached that document to the report. A couple months later, we had another warehouse fire. Right next door to the one that originally burned. We responded pretty fast and it was already fully involved. The engine, uh, captain told me he goes, "We entered the building and then it just seemed like everything lit off all at once." It's a pretty good indication that there was ignitable liquid because everything just lit off he said, um, all around them. It took us 12 hours to extinguish that fire. It was about a 36,000 square foot warehouse. I didn't deploy Hansel in that building because of all the glass as well. But it gets interesting because we were getting ready to wrap up and I get a call over the radio stating that there are detectives at the gate wanting to talk to me. I'm like, "Okay." So but these weren't the city of Millville detectives. These were detectives from out of county. And they're like, "Are you the lead investigator on this fire?" And I said, "Yes, sir. I'm the lead investigator here. I believe there's a problem within this complex." He goes, "There's a bigger problem altogether." And my heart just instantly just sank. I was like, "Oh, no." Uh, it's never good when you have another municipality come into your municipality and say, "Hey, your fire is similar to ours." So now you have Millville and Cumberland County and then you have another county about 45 minutes north that is all tied together. So we had a fire in Cumberland County, now we have a fire in Burlington County. And then a couple months prior, I believe it was, there was a very large warehouse fire in Limerick, Pennsylvania. So this is where Hansel really came in clutch. It was a proud dad moment. And, I brag about it all the time. So, remember how I said Hansel had an alert that was confirmed scientifically by the New Jersey State Police Lab of lighter fluid? Come to find out, on what the accelerator choice for the arsonist was lighter fluid. Okay. So, that's how we were able to connect the fires. So Hansel, with Hansel indicating, okay, and getting backed scientifically, really opened this case up.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**

Wow. So the Hansel angle, ultimately his lighter fluid alerting, is what helped connect all these things?

**Fire Marshall Van Leer:**

Yes, ma'am. If I didn't have Hansel at my side and he didn't give me that alert, I would have never taken a sample, you know? So with Hansel, with his nose, he essentially broke this case wide open and we were able to connect all these dots because he literally just came in out of nowhere and said, "Hey, there's something here." So in the end, four individuals were arrested because of how Hansel put me in the exact area where the lighter fluid was poured. And I took samples. It was just a little piece of wood. I mean nothing crazy, nothing huge, and it sure enough it came back as positive for lighter fluid. And, uh, that was, uh, the case that really put Hansel on the map. I still to this day brag about it because like I said, it was a proud dad moment and he has not stopped since then. There has, there's, I could talk for hours on this guy. Um, there's other cases that he put people behind bars.
Karman Hotchkiss:
So we know he's smart and he's hardworking and he's got a great sniffer, uh, what's Hansel like when he's not on duty?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
So Hansel is able to flick that switch we call. So he's able to flick that switch from being in work mode, now to being in social mode. Uh, so when he's not on duty, he goes to work with me and he comes home with me. So right now, he's out in his kennel. Hansel doesn't stay in the house with me, he's out in his shed kennel. So, when I say shed kennel, I mean it's a 10 by 10 kennel, he has his own AC, he has his own heat. The only thing that's missing is a TV. So it's literally a miniature house. And believe it or not, Hansel actually prefers it out there. It's quiet. He can decompress from work. So he prefers it out there. He has his own play area. He has his sleep area, and it's all locked up. It has cameras 360 degrees around it. Um, so, a lot of people ask me, "Does he mingle well with your personal dogs?" So I got two others that live with me, they're my personal dogs. Um, and I say, he interacts well. He has no problems. However, when you have a working dog, you don't want, there's a line that you don't cross. My personal dogs, they lounge around all day. They're lazy, you know, they're just couch potatoes. Dogs are very smart. So, if I brought him in, he will pick up on that behavior like, "Oh, I don't have to go to work. I can just I can stay home all day, just lounge." When you have a working dog, you don't want to cross that line. Like my wife will bring him in, she'll cuddle with him, spoil him a little bit and then he goes back out to his kennel. Um, so he has been in the house. He's intermingled with my dogs, no problem. However, he's a working dog, so we have to make sure that he stays on a straight and narrow until he retires and then once he retires, he comes in the house and then he can get spoiled all he wants.

Karman Hotchkiss:
As lazy as he wants to be.

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
Right. He can lounge around all day long if he wants after he retires. When he's not on duty, he's just a normal dog. A lot of people, they view it as, "Oh, he's a K-9. He's always working." No, that's not, that's not the case. He has downtime. He's probably sleeping right now. But when he hears my pager go off, or he hears our work truck turn on, he flicks that switch, "Okay, we're going back to work."

Karman Hotchkiss:
What's his official title?

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
So in the K-9 world, he is a single purpose scent dog. So mainly, all he does is use his nose. That's it. The correct terminology for when it comes to fire investigation is Ignitable Liquid Detection Canine. I know it's a lot.
Karman Hotchkiss:
Well, you guys are obviously a really great pair, and, uh, you know, you’re lucky you found each other. And certainly your community is really-

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
Absolutely.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Lucky to have a good working pair like you.

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
Oh yeah, I would not ask for a better partner.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Well, Fire Marshall Van Leer. Thank you for, I feel like I've learned so much today, and certainly have a soft spot in my heart for pit bulls and what they can bring to society and the bad rep that they sometimes have, and I just appreciate you sharing Hansel's story with us, as well as helping us learn so much more about what being a working dog involves.

Fire Marshall Van Leer:
Right. Yea, I appreciate the opportunity. I'm a proud K-9 handler of a dog who was going to be euthanized. Not even given a chance and he's proven that he is a great K9 partner.

Music: Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies Theme Music begins

Karman Hotchkiss (VO):
Thanks for joining us for this episode of Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies. Be sure to follow us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen. And we’d love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review, we’d really appreciate it. You can also find us online at dailypaws.com/WarmFuzziesPodcast. We hope you’ll join us next Wednesday, for a touching tale about an awe-inspiring posse of differently-abled rescue pups who, thanks to a very special theater professor, have found a home and purpose helping humans like them.

Music: Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies Theme Music Fades Out