

A special breed of volunteers chosen to lead festival parade

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Thursday, 13 September 2012 13:15 -



Chamber: Firefighters, EMTs are ‘superheroes’ because of what they do

Trying to rescue a mother and her children from a car that plummeted into an interstate lake is still a haunting memory for Jason Wagner.

For his brother, Mike, an icy wreck on Interstate 80 involving people trapped in cars comes to mind.

Jason is rescue captain and Mike is assistant rescue captain of the Gothenburg Volunteer Fire Department. Both are also emergency medical technicians.

The fire department, including EMTs, were selected as the grand marshals of the 98th Harvest Festival and described as “Super Heroes of Harvest” which is the festival theme.

With 44 members, the department will lead Saturday’s parade that begins at 10:30 a.m. on Lake Avenue.

Anne Anderson, director of the Gothenburg Chamber, said the fire department performs services that benefit the community.

“They are dedicated to protect Gothenburg and the surrounding area,” Anderson said. “They are on call 24/7 and it doesn’t matter whether it’s hot, cold, raining or during a blizzard. They answer the call.”

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The interstate wreck happened because of a blizzard and was what Mike described as “controlled chaos” after a car and semi-trailer truck collided and caused a chain reaction of other vehicles slamming into each other.

The brothers said fire chief Mark Ballmer and assistant fire chief Mark Ostergard had to come up with a plan on the spot and relay it to everyone who responded to the call.

Because some of the members have been on the department for 30 years, they said wisdom was shared with the younger men that day.

“Their wisdom often saves our behinds,” Mike said.

Sometimes that knowledge is about staying safe which can be difficult while trying to extract accident victims from vehicles with other cars and trucks whizzing by, the brothers said.

“You get so focused on the patient when semis are buzzing by you within feet,” Jason said.

But then, Jason said he puts himself in the patient’s position.

“You would want someone to respond quickly to you and take you to a safe place as quickly and safely as possible.”

He described members of the department as a special breed of people.

“Not a whole lot are willing to look at what we’ve seen,” he said.

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Mike said firefighters and EMTs have the training, knowledge and skill and put it to good work.

On average, Jason said the department responds to 250 EMT calls yearly.

“Someone’s fallen down or is trapped in or ejected from a vehicle,” he said. “We’ve also had a few water recoveries.”

So that firefighters know how to respond to calls, new members must take an EMT class within three years.

Often, Jason said it’s 240 hours of class time plus clinical time in six months. Clinical time means taking charge of a call while with another EMT and working in a hospital emergency room.

Fortunately, they said the City of Gothenburg pays for the class.

Once EMT certification is achieved, members must have 20 hours of continuing education within two years.

Frequently that can be tele-medicine classes through Goth-enburg Memorial Hospital or by attending emergency medical services conferences which are often over a weekend, Jason said.

Gothenburg is an anomaly when it comes to fire-fighting and rescue volunteers.

They have a waiting list when many communities are begging for volunteers.

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“Gothenburg is a solid community with people wanting to help,” Jason said.

To be a good fire and rescue volunteer, Jason said members need to be compassionate.

“You see people at their worst,” he explained. “You have to support the patient and their families emotionally.”

Mike pointed out the department’s pride factor in responding to fires or accidents.

“We don’t like to be second called,” he said.

To avoid a second page, the brothers want assistance from the community when sirens wail.

When you see or hear us, please pull over and stay out of the way,” Mike said. “And don’t flood the hospital with people.”

While fighting fires or responding to accidents, he asked community members to steer clear so the department can keep the scene safe.

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