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Island honors 2007 heroes

By Paul Boring

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The Red Cross Real Heroes Breakfast was appropriately unforgettable Tuesday morning, as pint-size saviors rubbed shoulders with valiant sailors during the event's 10th consecutive year.

The six respective awards each told harrowing stories of bravery or unbelievable acts of kindness or cunning. The self-effacing heroes earned their distinction.

Petty Officers First Class Seth Von Bortstel and Chad Lewis, both Search and Rescue members, each received the Military Award for their life-changing bravery exhibited Dec. 3 during Lewis County's catastrophic flooding.

Von Bortstel was readjusting to the Pacific Northwest after returning from the Middle East when he was called out to help rescue four hikers stranded in the mountains. Treacherous weather forced the helicopter to abandon the mission. The four hikers ultimately walked out and the helicopter headed south to contend with a surreal scene.

"The flooding was beyond comprehension," Von Bortstel said in the video segment preceding the award presentation.

Strong winds were unsuccessful in impeding the first rescue of three people stranded on a newly-formed island. While flying parallel to the "river" below, the second rescue of the nine-hour mission that entailed scooping up a stranded UPS driver was even more technically treacherous. Hovering 100-feet over the brown vehicle to avoid power lines, the SAR team was successful in recovering the grateful UPS employee.

"This was early December and he was wearing shorts," the Van Bortstel said with a laugh.

The third and final rescue involved working cohesively with another helicopter crew to pick up 16 more people from a flood-ravaged area.

Lewis served as the repel man. He was the first man down the hoist cable and the first face each stranded person saw before reaching the safety of the helicopter. Especially memorable was finding an amputee in one of the houses. The one-legged man, surprisingly gregarious given the situation, appealed to Lewis to first

take his wife. When it was his turn, the husband again reacted with unexpected levity.

"He said, 'You know, the last time I was in a helicopter, I lost my leg,'" Lewis recounted. "I said, 'Let's see what we can do about the other one.'"

During the eight or nine hours, more than 55 people were rescued. The SAR member credited the entire team, literally from the ground up, with helping make every mission possible.

"I don't go anywhere or do anything without them," he said of the people who give their all behind the scenes as well as in the aircraft.

Humanitarian Service

Cathy Caryl was given the Humanitarian Service Award that could just as easily been named the Philanthropic Snowball Effect Award. While her son was stationed in Iraq, the Island County Central Services director located a Web site at www.ansoldier.com that would allow her to send sundry items to the troops.

"They were men, but still just children," she said. "I knew they still liked gummi bears and potato chips."

Surpassing her most liberal expectations, Whidbey Cruzers generated three or four truckloads of donated items and the local Soroptimist group ended up with 10 loads through their selfless efforts.

"I can probably send packages for another 10 years if that's how it goes," Caryl said. With 19- or 20-year-olds fighting on the other side of the world, the least she could do was send Fritos. Diana Vaughn, Central Services assistant director, teamed up with her colleague to get the impressive snowball rolling.

Police Officer Award

Island County Deputy Jim Scott was given the Police Officer Award for the part he played in changing a DOA into a remarkable story. Last October, Scott was dispatched to a location where he was told a woman was on the verge of taking her own life. The residence's lights were on and a vehicle was parked in the open garage. When Deputy Rob Davis arrived at the scene, the partners found the front door unlocked and entered the house. Empty pill bottles scattered on the floor sent up a huge red flag.

"That's the first thing I noticed when I came around the corner," Scott said.

The deputies found the woman lying unconscious on the couch clutching family photographs.

"She woke up and told us it was too late and she died right in front of us," he said.

After eight minutes of administering CPR, an ambulance arrived. The woman, whose "last words" threatened to haunt the deputy for the remainder of his life, miraculously survived.

Davis stood next to his partner on the stage Tuesday morning and also received a medal from Undersheriff Kelly Mauck as well as thunderous applause from the audience.

Volunteer

Service Award

Corey Johnson is the consummate volunteer, and his Volunteer Service Award is a testament to his gratis efforts. From securing construction equipment, to supplying advice, to rounding up personnel, he was instrumental in getting lofty projects completed that directly benefited the community and the Oak Harbor School District.

His first successful undertaking involved installing a sprinkler at the new baseball field at North Whidbey Middle School. Once completed, Johnson assisted with putting up a new backstop and outfield fence. Bases will complete the project.

Channeling a whirling dervish on speed, the volunteer then donated his time and talents when he worked with the community to complete Oak Harbor High School's grounds makeover.

Johnson credited the throngs of students and teachers who "stepped up" and made the project a reality.

"It's easy to want to help when all of those other folks connect ..." he said. "It's almost contagious. The more you do, the more people appreciate it."

Youngest

Hero Award

Two-year-old Alana Miller, by far the youngest hero among the impressive group, received the Youth Good Samaritan Award for a calmness under pressure that many adults would lack.

Alana made national news in September of last year when she called 911 after her mother Erika, stricken with a migraine, passed out and struck her head on the floor. The amazing toddler, alone in the house with her mother, somehow managed to dial I-COM and successfully summon emergency medical personnel with the words "mama owie."

Alana opened the door to find surprised medics and led the first responders to her mother. Erika recalled hearing people at the door and then her daughter sitting vigil as she regained consciousness.

"The whole time she was sitting on me, she got me a blanket and covered me up," Erika said. "She brought me her bear."

The two-year-old had reportedly retained safety information from a Red Cross video she had previously viewed.

Emergency Service Award

Emergency services operator Hattie Schweitzer could have been on the other end of Alana's call at I-COM. Although she never had the pleasure of speaking to the wonder child, she did earn the Emergency Service Award for the life-saving words she provided during a Friday, Aug. 17 call.

A suicidal woman who reportedly just came off a 20-year stint of sobriety told Schweitzer that she was in possession of a gun and razor blades. The despondent caller's resolve was unquestionable. She had reached what dispatchers call "the crisis point."

"I basically just helped her through her moment of crisis," she said. When law enforcement and EMS personnel arrived, taking extra precautionary measures because of the possible weapons in

the premises, Schweitzer convinced the woman to communicate with the first responders.

She credited the entire I-COM team with the feat.

"At the end of the call, it's not just one person," Schweitzer said. "I'm glad she felt better that day. That's all we can do at a dispatch center."

Judy Poolman Allen was a runner-up nominee for the Humanitarian Service Award, while Joe Dixon and Walt Bankowski were recognized as runners-up nominees for the Volunteer Service Award. The trio are heroes in their own right.

The Island County Chapter of the Red Cross was the recipient of all funds generated by the annual breakfast. Generous community sponsors made the event possible and helped keep the chapter helping people.

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