



Once a week, after spending seven hours in front of a blackboard at Saxe Middle School, teachers Ann Clay (front), Stephanie Moore (left) and Erika Shupe, as well as St. Luke's Middle School Dean Troy Haynie (inset), don New Canaan Volunteer Ambulance Corps uniforms for an overnight shift as EMTs. (Laura Kenyon, John Kovach photos)

Teachers by day, heroes by night

Educators volunteer for Ambulance Corps

By Laura Kenyon
Assistant Editor

Clark Kent has hair gel and a cape. Bruce Wayne has a cutting edge bundle of neoprene rubber. Stephanie Moore, Troy Haynie, Ann Clay and Erika Shupe have blue pants and stethoscopes.

During the day, they are teachers at St. Luke's School and Saxe Middle School. But when the sun goes down and someone cries for help, these academic heroes transform into medical saviors as members of the New Canaan Volunteer Ambulance Corps.

Begun in 1975 with 11 members and 80 emergency calls, the free service has grown into a 60-volunteer nonprofit organization responding to 1,600 emergency calls a year.



For Ann Clay, a fifth grade teacher at Saxe, the calling came in a post-9/11 sermon by the Rev. Harold E. "Skip" Masback III at the Congregational Church.

"Everyone was asking him what to do," she told the *Advertiser*, "and one of his pieces of advice was to get trained in something ... so if something like this happened again we could help."

Recalling the mood of the time, the Rev. Masback said he had wanted to explore the resolve behind the numerous American flags and statements of unity that emerged after 9/11.

Titled "A Call to Arms," his sermon asked Parishioners what burdens they were willing to bear to back up these expressions of solidarity.

"We must learn to live with this fear and not retreat before it," he told his congregation, adding, "There has never been a better time to reach out to our neighbor."

To answer that call, Ms. Clay

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Getting fit

Looking to the past and the future, acupuncture and technology play key roles in fitness.

Special Section



Heroes: Teachers by day, EMTs by night

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enrolled in the Stamford Hospital Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) course with a fellow New Canaanite and fifth grade teacher Stephanie Moore.

Neither had intended on volunteering upon certification, which Ms. Moore sought for several reasons — from 9/11 to aging parents to the desire to never again feel as “helpless” as she did when a “horrific accident” occurred in front of her on the Merritt Parkway.

“I just wanted the training in the beginning for my own benefit,” Ms. Moore told the *Advertiser*, “so that I could help if I found myself in an emergency situation.”

Somewhere along the line, however, they gained the confidence to become “probies,” then active volunteers, then, for Ms. Moore, president of the Corps.

“The training that we get in New Canaan is unsurpassed,” said Ms. Clay, explaining her change of heart.

NCVAC captain since 2006 and volunteer since 1994, Mr. Haynie joined as a way to get involved when he moved to New Canaan. During the day, he is dean of middle school life at St. Luke’s, where he also teaches eighth grade government and civics.

Always interested in emergency services and helping people, Mr. Haynie got started on his own by “cold calling” the Corps.

“I knew exactly what I wanted to do,” he said. “I have a lot of respect for firemen but I don’t have an interest in going into burning buildings. So this was the other way for me to help with the town’s emergency services.”

Mr. Haynie remained an active member of NCVAC when he moved to Norwalk two years ago, while Ms. Shupe moved here this summer so she could respond to more backup calls. She has been on the corps for two years and will soon complete driver training, an additional certification not all members pursue.

A Latin teacher at Saxe, Ms. Shupe said NCVAC was a challenge that “appeased the need for another life’s goal.”

“My lifelong passion was to be a Latin teacher, and after I attained that goal I needed something else,” she said. “Being an EMT is something you can’t master. It’s an ongoing process of learning, just like school.”

Two hats

A typical shift at NCVAC begins with a thorough check of the supplies in the ambulance, as well as the rig itself, to ensure everything is prepared for whatever the next 12 hours will bring.

The South Avenue facility, a converted high school shop garage, has three bedrooms, indoor bays for two ambulances and a fly car, and a living area that includes a table, television, two couches and a kitchen area. As the third ambulance and one SUV must sit outside, and as the organization has quintupled since its founding, NCVAC is in the process of building a new headquarters.

NCVAC members are required work a total of 60 hours a month, most of which is covered by a weekly 12-hour shift, so the teachers must go from the classroom to the corps (from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.) and back to the classroom again the following day.

Sometimes they spend the nights doing chores, sleeping, correcting papers or watching TV. But when the alarm sounds and a dispatcher’s voice crackles through spouting details of an emergency call, the mood swiftly yet systematically transforms.

“Your adrenaline kicks into action and all thoughts of other things are gone for a while,” Ms. Moore described. “You become solely focused on your patient.”

Hopping up to grab their jackets and radios, the crew rushes — but never runs, Mr. Haynie pointed out — to the ambulance, which tears (albeit slowly, with just two inches of clearance on each side) out of the bay while the crew gathers the necessary tools.

NCVAC members are prohibited by law from discussing specific incidents, which can range from benign assistance calls to life-threatening predicaments. Last year, 1,650 calls resulted in transport to area hospitals.

Although the tragic calls don’t occur often in such a quaint, small town, Mr. Haynie said, “New Canaan is not exempt from reality. And that happens.”

And while it might be hard to imagine giving CPR at 3 a.m. and strolling into the classroom to teach Latin four hours later, for the teachers it just comes with the territory.

“You learn to move on,” Ms. Shupe said. “It’s tough and it’s tricky, because you have to put what happened on the ambulance the night before in the back of your mind, turn the page and start fresh.”

“It could have been a student’s parent and they’re sitting right in front of you,” she described a possible result of living and working in a small town. “I change back into my teacher hat. I’m a teacher first.”

Ms. Moore has found that planning the day out ahead is key, while Ms. Clay finds being tired in front of a bunch of 10-year-olds literally impossible.

“The fact is, once you’re in the classroom, the energy from the kids doesn’t allow you to be down or tired,” she said. “You’re on. The kids feed you their energy.”

Once or twice a year, Mr. Haynie said he answers calls all night and feels like “a zombie” the next morning, but a simple “Go easy on me” is all it takes to get his students in line.

“The kids really respect what I do,” he said.

Role Models

Without interfering with civics, English or Latin lessons, the extra skills these EMT/teachers have gives the students a little extra perspective.

Fielding easy questions such as, “Do you really sleep there?,” as well as those that cannot be answered due to HIPAA restrictions, the teachers feel their students are “proud of,” “interested

in” and “supportive of” their secret identities.

In the words of Mr. Haynie, who has seen seven former student become EMTs or paramedics, “They think it’s cool.”

“It has nothing but a positive influence on the students,” said Ms. Moore, “and hopefully it will encourage them to do the same thing when they get older and give back to their community.”

Listening to their “gory stories,” paying specific attention to their broken arms, and trusting them to understand rather than simply memorize emergency procedures, Ms. Shupe feels her NCVAC persona strengthens her relationship with her students.

“I expect absolutely perfect behavior during a fire drill. If I have to leave the room because someone crashes out in the hallway, they know they have to hold their composure,” she said “I trust my students and they trust me. And I expect the most out of them and they expect the most out of me — no matter what happens.”

Having taken many of their peers to the hospital from the football field or the YMCA, she said getting them to stop waving and calling to her while she’s on call is difficult — but it shows admiration.

“It opens up a huge other avenue for them to be able to approach you,” she said. “They see me as a role model of giving back to the community. A lot of them have said, ‘How old do I have to be to do this?’”

Yet although their training can come in handy in the classroom and on field trips, the NCVAC teachers try to defer to the school nurses while on campus.

“Our nurses are the first line at school,” Ms. Clay said. “We’re happy to assist if needed, but 99 percent of the time the nurse is the front line.”

Mr. Haynie agreed, saying that although he is on St. Luke’s emergency planning team and is part of its emergency action plan, he tries not to get overly involved with his students’ health.

“I don’t like to step on the nurse’s toes,” he said.

Instead, he flexes his NCVAC muscles by assisting with CPR training, organizing first aid awareness workshops, and sitting in on 11th grade health classes — particularly the lessons about drug use.

“I have seen a drug overdose,” he said. Relaying his experiences helps the lesson “hit home a little stronger.”

Ms. Shupe’s fear of one day pulling a former student out of a wrecked car also helps a valuable life lesson come alive for her students. Before letting her eighth graders go in the spring, she said she has a “very serious conversation” with them about the dangers of drinking and driving, and speeding.

“I think that hits home for them,” she said, “when they see me get very firm, very serious, very emotional, and say ‘I don’t want to be that EMT.’”

Welcome

Like any profession that aims to save lives, riding an ambulance has moments of heartwarming triumph and moments of heart-wrenching defeat.

When asked what he would tell someone interested in joining the corps, Mr. Haynie replied: “Welcome to one of the most rewarding things you’re going to do in your life. Do the best you can to the best of your ability, and be open-minded about the outcome.”

In 2007, the Ambulance Corps responded to more than 1,500 calls.

More information about NCVAC, fund-raising for the new facility, and volunteering can be found at ncvac.org.

Ms. Moore said anyone who is interested in joining up to should visit headquarters and speak with someone. It is important to realize the commitment required, she added, which adds up to about 60 hours a month plus drills and other meetings.

“You really have to have the support of your family behind you because you have to dedicate so many hours to the corps,” she said.

“I couldn’t do it if they didn’t say we’ll cover the dog, we’ll cover the painter that’s coming,” Ms. Clay agreed. “It has to be a family effort If I were bucking City Hall, so to speak, to do this, I just wouldn’t do it.”

Ms. Shupe said she would “absolutely encourage” young people looking to join up, with some words of advice: “This is not a program for every 18-year-old. This is for the students who are interested in medicine, for students who want to give back to their community, and for students who are mature enough to handle the subject matter that they would be witnessing.”

Mr. Haynie said his time with NCVAC has taught him to appreciate what he has, especially his family and his health.

“No matter how bad you think you have it,” he said, “you go on a call for a terminally ill cancer patient and you go, ‘OK, my life’s pretty good,’ and you say a prayer for that guy; you really do.”

“On a whole, serving the community, knowing you’re helping people in need, it’s very rewarding,” Ms. Moore said. “Many times you know you’ve made a difference, even if it’s just being there, reassuring someone, making them feel more comfortable. It’s a great feeling.”

She added, “I wish I had done this a long time ago.”

Rates: Bankers, planner

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Interest rate cuts affect individuals both paying interest and living off of it, but they also serve

in Waterbury said that mortgages would be less affected by the interest rates cuts than things tied to the prime or overnight rate, like credit cards.

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