

Monday, September 25, 2006

Marin Search & Rescue: When emergencies strike, all-volunteer unit gets a call

By Joe Wolfcale

A woman disappears from a picnic bench at China Camp. A hiker tumbles from a trail and dies in a creek bed at the Marin Headlands. Police need help during an evidence search in the Canal area of San Rafael.

As similar dramas or other emergencies unfold across the county, chances are the all-volunteer Marin Search & Rescue team is on the job.

"It can be frustrating and it can be emotionally challenging," Marin Search & Rescue training coordinator Bijan Karimi said. "We always hope to find someone alive."

"Sometimes it hits close to home."

Karimi helped as operations manager on the massive search for Sausalito hiker Jim Pfeiffer last winter. The body of Pfeiffer, 60, was discovered near the Miwok Trail in the Headlands after more than 150 searchers, including a group from Marin Search & Rescue, combed trails and wooded areas for a weekend.

"After something like that, our team has to meet and debrief about the situation," Karimi said. "It was hard because you get to know these families when they're worried about missing loved ones." The Marin Search & Rescue unit is a 60-member organization of volunteers, aged 14 to 75, on call around the clock, seven days a week. Members are paged and must respond in 45 minutes.

"Sometimes, I do miss out on family events," said Karimi, 34, who lives in Marin with his wife and daughter. "I just like meeting different people and giving back. What we are providing is a safety net for everybody to enjoy the outdoors in Marin and elsewhere. I'm a real outdoors guy, so it's a pretty big rush for me."



Volunteer Joe Hanssen handles the rope attached to a litter supporting a victim during a mock-rescue training exercise. Marin County Search and Rescue stages mock rescues to train volunteers in a real-life situation. (Special to the IJ/Kevin Hagen)

Two Marin County teenagers are involved with the team as youth leaders. Twins Devin and Cory Rand, 15, joined the program after their older sister Lauren, got them interested when she was a member.

"We really wanted to do it, so as soon as we were old enough we applied and got in," Cory Rand said. "We don't have jobs, but school is a pretty big commitment for us. We finds ways to balance the two. If anything, the core of the team is the youth membership."

The Rands, who are sophomores at Tamalpais High, got their first big opportunity during the Pfeiffer search. Cory Rand's team found the leash of Maxwell, Pfeiffer's three-legged border collie, that helped lead teams to his body. "Even though we were all pretty sad about the outcome, his wife came to all of us and thanked us for everything," Cory Rand said.



"Although it ended tragically, I think it gave the family some closure."

Marin County Search & Rescue volunteers lift victim Laurie Weiland onto a litter in a mock-rescue training exercise at the Indian Valley open space preserve in Novato. (Special to the IJ/Kevin Hagen)

In the event of a call on the weekend, parents David and Sheryl drive the boys to a command center or a transportation site.

"We know that school always comes first," said Devin, who along with his brother participates in cross country at Tam. "The main reason I wanted to join was because it feels good helping out, doing something good for the community. Searches are such huge adrenaline rushes."

Team members are required to complete a 60-hour boot camp and an additional 60 hours of medical training within the first year of joining. They must be able to carry a 40-pound pack and be able to stay in the wilderness at least 24 hours.

The group, which works with the Marin Urban Search & Rescue team, which is involved with urban searches, undergoes rigorous training, including compass and orienteering skills, rope rescues and helicopter training.

The unit prides itself on being able to provide support teams "anytime, anywhere, any weather."

The team works with the Marin County Sheriff's Mounted Posse, Air Patrol and statewide canine teams, searching for missing people in wilderness settings.

The unit got its origins in 1966 as Explorer Post 74, and initially focused on ecology and outdoors educational programs. In 1976, the American Red Cross became a sponsor. During that era, the team assisted with the "orphan airlift" of Vietnamese refugee children at Hamilton Field. In 1978, the Sheriff's Department took over sponsorship of the team.