

Hometown

12 Local Heroes who made a difference in 2009

BY BLYTHE THIMSEN

IT SOUNDS LIKE A SCENE FILMED for a blockbuster action movie: “Action!” A house is engulfed in flames while the family inside is deep in a peaceful slumber, unaware of the danger all around them. Outside, the smoke-filled streets are empty in the early hours. With no one around, who will see the smoke and flames and save the family? There appears to be no hope. Cue the music as, suddenly, a lone figure appears in the early morning light. Seeing the horrific scene before him, he springs to action, breaking down the door, running into the smoke and flame filled house and rescuing the family. “And cut!”

The hero cast in the above scene wasn't an actor, though, and the scene wasn't from a movie. It was what really happened this past June, when Deputy Christopher Johnston of the Medical Lake Police Department stumbled upon a home engulfed in flames, and he ran into the house, rescuing the sleeping family.

The family whom he rescued thinks Deputy Johnston is a hero, and so does the Inland Northwest Chapter of the American Red Cross, which recently held its annual Hometown Heroes celebration, honoring 12 local heroes who have done heroic deeds in the past year. This year was the biggest event ever, with about 550 attendees gathering to celebrate the heroes in our community.

Honoring local heroes is something that quite a few Red Cross chapters do throughout the country. “Our primary goal with the event was to share stories of incredible acts of heroism and service in our community and to really celebrate those individuals who are making a difference,” says Megan Snow, Director of Communications and Marketing for the Spokane Chapter of the Red Cross. “We also appreciate the chance to share the story of the Red Cross and try to raise some money to help us do the work that we do. Personally, I like the concept because it allows us to recognize local heroes and tell the story of the Red Cross, which is made up of volunteers, whom we also consider everyday heroes.”

Those everyday heroes of the Red Cross contribute to our city's well being on a daily basis. While most people associate the Red Cross' presence with big events, like hurricanes and national disasters, the vast majority of disaster relief operations take place in neighborhoods. “On average, our chapter responds to an incident, most commonly a house fire, about every 48 hours,” says Snow. On any given day, the American Red Cross helps a family who has lost everything in a house fire or other disaster, 200 times. Last year, the Spokane chapter of the Red Cross responded to 119 incidents.

“Honestly, it feels a bit strange,” says Deputy Johnston of being called a hero. “I don't believe what I did merits the title of ‘hero’, but I'm glad that I was able to be there that day and make a difference in someone else's life.”

The difference that he made with his selfless actions means that a family is still alive today. It makes you wonder if someone else had been there instead of Johnston, would they have reacted in the same way? What gives someone the courage to go into a burning house? “That is difficult to answer,” says Johnston. “I'm really not quite sure. I didn't have much time to process what was happening at the time. It certainly was not about being hailed as a hero, or receiving an award. I saw what I perceived to be an ‘urgent problem’, and did the best I could to try to solve it.”

Was there a moment of hesitation, though? “No, no hesitation,” he says of his reaction to entering the burning house. “Of course, I stopped and thought about it for a moment, but my thoughts were centered around quickly and safely getting the job done. I was thinking, ‘If there are people in this house, we have to get them out NOW!!!’”

This was Johnston's first time running into a burning house, but he says “I would do it again in a heartbeat if it



Bios courtesy of the
Inland Northwest
Chapter of the
American Red Cross.

Heroes

was necessary.”

Heroes are not just those who react to life-and-death emergencies, but also those who work to solve problems before they occur. One such hero is Emily Thies, a 15-year old who recently moved to Spokane from South Dakota, and who is credited with saving the life of a police dog, thanks to her tireless efforts to raise funds to purchase equipment to keep police dogs safe from heat stroke while staying in their police cars.

“My inspiration originally came from my love of animals,” says Thies. “When I was younger I would set aside some of my money to donate dog and cat food to our local humane society. We have a family friend that works with the police dogs and after talking with him I became very interested in them as well. My original plan was to donate bullet proof dog vests.”

After Thies formulated her idea, she set aside half of the money she earned pet sitting until she had reached a savings of \$1,000, at which point she contacted the Spokane Police Department. “They declined the vests because they do not use them, but they asked if I would buy them the car alarms systems,” she says. “They gave me the name and website of a company they knew about that sold the type of car alarms they wanted. I got on the com-

pany website and emailed them. Talking back and forth with the company and the police, I arranged the order and I bought the car alarm systems for two of the K-9 police cars.”

With the car alarms in place, Emily is credited with saving Ekko, a sheriff’s patrol dog, from heat exhaustion this past summer!

This wasn’t Thies’ first stint at rescuing dogs. Back when she lived in Rapid City, South Dakota, she heard about a Chihuahua at the Humane Society who had been hit by a car. “No one had claimed him and he was badly hurt,” she says. A few days later Thies and her mom went to visit and found out that the Humane Society had no funds to pay for the dog’s surgery and he was going to be put down that afternoon. “Despite his injury he was still one of the sweetest dogs ever,” she says. Knowing that she couldn’t let him be put down because of lack of money, Thies donated \$500 she had saved, paying for the surgery.

Johnston and Thies, along with the other 10 heroes who were honored, view themselves as regular individuals, rather than heroes. “It feels very unreal to be called a hero,” says Thies. “There are no words to truly describe it. I feel very honored especially because all I was hoping to get out of this was to be able to talk to the K-9 handlers, see

how the systems I donated work, and meet one of the dogs. When I found out I was being honored I was very excited because it’s not everyday that someone gets a hometown hero award.”

The true lesson here is that anyone can be a hero. Your actions don’t necessarily have to be dramatic to be heroic. Taking the time to go above and beyond the call of duty, being willing to help a friend or stranger in need, and asking yourself what act, no matter how small, can you do to help make your community a better place, can be an act of heroism.

“To your readers, I would say to get involved with something you love because then it becomes a more personal project,” says Thies. “It will not feel like an obligation, but something you look forward to doing each week.”

Johnston believes we can each make a difference. “I believe that we, as people, should take care of one another when we can,” he says. “It’s the reason that I got into law enforcement in the first place. I am fortunate enough to help people every day that I go to work. It’s my job to keep people safe, but as you saw with some of the other honorees, you don’t need to be a firefighter or police officer to be a hero. Regular people do great things every day.”

We are honored to present the 2009 Hometown Hero bios from the Inland Northwest Chapter of the American Red Cross. The stories here are inspiring, and better than anything you’ll see in a movie!

Hometown



Youth Humanitarian Hero
Emily Thies

Emily, a 15-year-old Gonzaga Prep student, raised and donated \$800 to outfit two local police cars with special systems designed to keep patrol dogs cool in the heat of summer. The equipment rolls down the windows and turns a fan on when the internal temperature in the car gets too hot, ensuring that the K-9 officers inside the vehicle don't get overheated. Because of her donation, Emily is credited with saving a sheriff's patrol dog from heat exhaustion this past summer.



Adult Humanitarian Hero
Cliff Matherly

Last December, Clifford Matherly led an effort by the Spokane Tribe to rescue almost 40 horses from starvation and exposure. When he learned about the animals' dire situation, Cliff helped deliver food to the horses and recruited additional members of the Spokane Tribe to donate hay, plow a trail, assist with feeding, and find the animals a permanent home. The Spokane Tribe donated \$1,000 to each of the two animal shelters that took the herd in and Cliff continues to check on the animals.



Animal Rescue Hero
Var, Police K-9 (deceased)

More than a law enforcement partner, Police K-9 Var was Spokane Police Officer Dan Lesser's friend and lifesaver. Var was an arm's length away from catching a suspected car thief when he was shot twice last March. Var's sacrifice prevented the officers from being injured by the thief's bullets. While he survived the shooting and was honored with the Purple Heart, Var developed a tumor and later passed away due to complications from the surgery.

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Workplace Safety Hero
Jennifer McKenzie

Jennifer McKenzie, RN, and certified Lactation Consultant, saves babies' lives every day inside the walls of Sacred Heart Medical Center's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Jennifer goes far beyond her job description in helping babies survive: she started Sacred Heart's nursing moms support group which has helped hundreds of women and their babies and she has also helped change hospital policy so every premature infant born at Sacred Heart has access to breast milk.



National Military Hero
SSgt. Robert Jones

While on duty at his security post on Fairchild Air Force Base, Staff Sergeant Robert Jones responded to a victim who was in medical emergency. The man was having an allergic reaction to a bee sting and soon became unconscious and unresponsive. SSgt. Jones noticed there was a faint pulse with no breathing and the man's face had turned a deep red color. He immediately began performing CPR until the individual's heart rate resumed and he began breathing on his own.



International Military Hero
1st Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment

Throughout their deployment to Iraq last year, the soldiers of the Washington National Guard 1st Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment escorted supply convoys around the war-torn country, traveling over 1.7 million miles and enduring more than 50 attacks. During their 1,800 convoy missions, the unit ensured the safe delivery of 110 million gallons of fuel, 600,000 tons of supplies and 120 million gallons of water while supporting the 3rd Sustainment Command logistics mission in Iraq.

HomeTown



Medical Hero
Andrea Kernkamp

While on an airline flight from Spokane to San Diego, local Firefighter Andrea Kernkamp came to the aid of an infant that had gone into respiratory arrest. Andrea stayed with the infant and performed resuscitative measures for 42 minutes until the plane could be landed safely at the airport. After landing, the infant had begun breathing on its own and was passed along to EMS workers on the ground.



Law Enforcement Hero
Deputy Christopher Johnston

While on patrol in June, Medical Lake Police Deputy Christopher Johnston noticed smoke lingering in the early morning air. Hearing no fire calls on the scanner, Officer Johnston quickly patrolled the neighborhoods and stumbled upon a house engulfed in flames. Although the fire was already consuming the roof, Deputy Johnston broke down the door and made several trips through dense, waist-high smoke to rescue the sleeping family from inside.



Fire Safety Hero
Austin Griffith

During his morning commute to deliver flowers, Austin Griffith came upon a major vehicle accident on Highway 195 south of Spangle. A gasoline tanker truck had collided with a pick-up, sending both vehicles off the road. Griffith quickly pulled over and rushed to help. With gasoline gushing from the tanker and flames fighting their way into the cab, Griffith broke the cab glass and helped pull the driver away as the truck was consumed by fire. Griffith also provided assistance to the driver of the pick-up and both men involved in the collision walked away with minor injuries.

Heroes



**Wilderness Rescue Hero
Mt. Spokane Ski Patrol**

With a tireless dedication and commitment to saving lives, the Mt. Spokane Ski Patrol provides outstanding medical care to their guests every winter. In February 2009, a guest was discovered in a remote area of the mountain. He had suffered cardiac arrest and was unresponsive. Several ski patrollers showed relentless effort in administering medical aid while transporting the victim out of the wilderness.



**Water Safety Hero
Sean Caskey and Devin Stuck**

Robert Yamada, Devin Stuck, and Sean Caskey were enjoying a day on Lake Roosevelt when Robert accidentally dove into shallow water and was found floating on the surface. Fearing he had suffered a spinal injury, Sean and Devin carefully pulled their friend's body toward the edge of the water and Devin began CPR while Sean went for help. Devin and Sean continued CPR for 40 minutes until a medical helicopter could arrive and transport Robert to the hospital. Robert survived the accident with no loss of brain function.



**Local Disaster Hero
Jeff Philipps**

On December 29, 2009, under the massive weight of several feet of heavy snow, the roof of the Rosauers at Five Mile suddenly collapsed leaving a 26,000 foot hole in the ceiling and destroying everything it fell on to. The store would have to be closed for several months while the damage was fixed. Concerned about the effect that this would have on the 120 employees who worked at this Rosauers location, CEO Jeff Philipps elected not to lay off his staff, but to keep all of the workers on at 90 percent of their base pay and rotate them to other store locations until the store at Five Mile could be rebuilt.