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On call: 17 hours with Medic 830

Sentinel reporter Dana Amihere and photographer Jim Davis ride along with Prince George's County paramedics

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Photo by Jim Davis. Paramedic trainee Charles Lisko assists a patient Saturday night.

Published on: Wednesday, May 23, 2012

By Dana Amihere

Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department responds to about 130,000 incidents each year. Nearly 80 percent of these responses are EMS related.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

Those are words most people hope they never have to hear. Most people never know what is happening on the other end of the call. But for EMS week May 20-26 stations across the county opened their doors to the media to find out.

What really happens after you make that call for help?

At Station 30 in Landover Hills, the paramedics of Medic 830 spring to action. As the dispatcher’s voice comes over the intercom and sirens blare, the printer screeches out the call sheet with the

details of the emergency. In a matter of minutes, the truck is on the road.

“The alarm can go off anytime, so you’re always on edge. It’s the unknown. You have no clue what’s waiting for you so you have to be prepared mentally,” 13-year veteran Ed Aldaco said.

On a quiet Saturday night, only one other call has come in, which for career paramedic Arbrej Butler is a blessing for people he serves.

“When you start out (on this job) you’re all gung-ho,” Butler said. “The longer you do this, though, you hope that red phone never rings because it means someone’s having a bad day.”

On the job for 19 years, Butler said he has seen things people wouldn’t believe. One day, a minivan flipped and rolled across the roadway in front of the ambulance only blocks from the station. While the woman driving survived the accident, many people on calls that Butler has responded to haven’t been as lucky.

One of the most jarring calls he responded to was for a mother and her infant child shot by the father. The woman had taken out a restraining order less than 24 hours prior to her murder. The man, who was apprehended while out eating dinner after he had killed his family, left a photo of the trio in the baby’s crib. They had been dead awhile, Butler said, and there was nothing that could be done for them.

But, Butler said he is “being used by God” to bring people back from the brink of death in some cases.

“I’ve watched a patient’s vital signs come back from nothing. Being able to perform a medical intervention and reverse that process is a good feeling,” he said.

Calls are much more benign on this quiet Saturday night, such as treating a 20-year-old’s asthma attack and an elderly woman’s debility. At times, calls can be too straightforward, said Butler, such as a 25-year-old with a headache and a grown man with an office staple shallowly buried in his finger – easily plucked out and treated with a Band-Aid.

“It’s not that I don’t want to help somebody, but there are people out there with more serious problems (who need us),” Butler said.

While a person’s problem may be “their emergency,” Butler says paramedics are for “cases of life

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and death.”

But then there are patients who underestimate the severity of their injuries. Tiffany Brookings, who spent the first half of her career as a volunteer firefighter, had a man complaining of chest pain after he had returned from the bar. His mother called 911 – he had been stabbed in the abdomen.

In his six months at Station 30, trainee paramedic Charles Lisko says he is starting to understand what it means to interact with the community.

“We see the same call a lot, but it’s never the same,” he said.

“You can’t assume anything on calls,” Brookings explained. “Things may be totally different on scene. You have to be prepared to act (on anything).”

But a love for the job keeps medics coming back every day, said Brookings, who has used only five sick days in seven years.

The ever-present voice of the dispatcher on the PA makes for a night of restless sleep, at least for a ride-along newbie. For the seasoned night crew, however, the garbled sounds have become white noise, even outside that station, said Butler. The hum of the printer also sticks with you wherever you go, joked Aldaco, laughing as he describes how he panicked when he heard the printer spitting out his receipt at a fast food restaurant.

“We run into burning buildings, shootings, accidents when most people run the other way. You have to be a little off to do this (job),” Aldaco said.

As daylight breaks and night fades, calls come in at a steadier pace. An accident on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway ends in two fatalities. A hyperglycemic woman needs treatment at a Hyattsville nursing home. A 53-year-old man complains of chest pain in Landover. Lunch is interrupted by a 19-year-old seizing in a Dodge Park parking lot as the dispatcher calls for a medic unit over the radio.

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