National First Responders Day | October 2021

FIRST RESPONDERS
APPRECIATION

Recognizing 10 local heroes who go above and beyond the call of duty

Independent Record | St. Peter’s Health
First Responders Appreciation | National First Responders Day | October 2021

When everyone else runs away from danger, first responders run toward it.

In honor of National First Responders Day, which is on Oct. 28, the Independent Record and presenting sponsor St. Peter’s Health are recognizing 10 of these everyday heroes in the Helena area.

The 10 first responders honored in this special section were selected from nominations submitted by the community.

King River Hotshots prepare to work on the North Hills fire in this IR file photo from July 2019.

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Volunteering for a rural fire department isn’t always like working for a city department. Sometimes the first firefighter gets to the scene and it can be a while before more help can get there.

That’s according to Brandon Price, who has been with the Tri-Lakes Volunteer Fire Department for five years. The department covers more than 100 square miles east of Helena, including parts around Canyon Ferry Reservoir, according to its website.

“It’s a huge area for the number of people we have,” Price said. “Sometimes in a rural fire department you do have a team around you, sometimes you’re all alone.”

Price, who now runs Medicine Springs, said being a former science teacher led to his interest in becoming an Emergency Medical Responder as well. He said in a department of

“There’s a central feeling that your community needs you. I like that feeling.”
Wally Jester knows firsthand the need for firefighters. His family home burned down in 1969 when he was in high school. No one was hurt in the chimney fire, but he said when he heard the Lewis and Clark County Volunteer Fire Department needed help in 1976, he joined. About a year after that, “next thing I know, I was chief.”

“Wally has dedicated his life to being a first responder and fire fighter.”

In his years at the department, Jester said he’s tried to encourage local departments to form and pare down the county’s responsibility to something more manageable. Most recently, he said Lewis and Clark is in the process of combining with the West Valley fire department, which it already had a partnership with. “The struggle I’ve always had, I
WORKING AROUND THE CLOCK
FOR OUR COMMUNITY

Thank you to our community’s first responders for all you do each day. Your important work isn’t easy, and it
should never go unnoticed. On First Responders Day and every day, we celebrate your sacrifice and dedication.

We’re proud of our St. Peter’s first responders who work tirelessly every
day of the year:
• Advanced EMTs
• EMTs
• Paramedics
• Crisis response team
• Community paramedics

St. Peter’s Health
A higher state of care
Being a firefighter was seemingly always in the cards for 40-year-old Steve Finstad of East Helena.

Finstad has served the Helena area as a first responder, both as a firefighter and emergency medical technician, for more than 20 years. It all started when he joined the East Helena Volunteer Fire Department as a senior in high school.

“My buddy’s dad was the volunteer fire chief. At the time, I didn’t even know if I’d like it,” Finstad said.

“But I wanted to do something to give back to my community.”

After a few years, Finstad joined the Montana Army National Guard as a firefighter in an effort to get more training and more knowledge.

“I enjoy serving the community I live in. It’s an exciting job that changes every day.”
One thing Finstad wanted to draw attention to is the linemen and gas workers who he regularly works with. Finstad said they are often left out when people think of first responders, but their jobs are just as crucial for the safety of the community, and according to Finstad they “work really hard and bust their butts out there.”

Price

From 3

about 30, he is one of 11 with medical training. He said people may be surprised by how broad a role volunteer firefighters can play, including in medical calls.

“They’re surprised when they see volunteers come,” Price said. “Any call to 911 comes to us, we’re the ones who respond.”

Tri-Lakes formed in 2005 when the Canyon Ferry Volunteer and Lakeside Volunteer fire departments combined, according to its website. Price said having volunteers spread out allows them to respond rapidly because they’re usually nearby, and they work with other departments.

“There’s a central feeling that your community needs you,” Price said. “I like that feeling.”

Price said he mainly works out of the department’s Station Four on the west shore of Canyon Ferry. Ken Price, Brandon’s father, said he’s very dedicated to being a first responder.

“The amount of time that he and all the other first responders put in is incredible, and it’s all unpaid,” Ken said.

Tri-Lakes is currently looking for volunteers, according to its website. Price said the department is always in need of personnel but it has been especially hard with the pandemic. He said they are able to do the job, but having more people would mean better chances of positive outcomes.

“You give up a lot of time with your family and finding that balance can be tough,” Price said. “That’s why it’s great to have that group of people who have been through it with you.”

Thank you, heroes.

You serve and protect all of us every day.

Your selfless bravery helps keep our community strong.

We are grateful, and we support you.

Learn more at Benefis.org/Helena
If ever there was an example of an officer who goes above and beyond the call of duty, it would be 33-year-old trooper Amanda Villa.

Villa wears many hats at the Montana Highway Patrol. She serves as a District 3 traffic homicide investigator, a drone operator, an evidence technician and more. In her eight years with MHP, Villa has taken on lots of jobs and has been recognized for her hard work.

In July 2021, Villa was given the Medal of Valor, MHP’s highest honor, for her acts of heroism in rescuing several people from a helicopter crash. Villa said she is able to keep her cool in those kinds of situations because of her training and her personality.

“I was always very interested in a first responder type job,” Villa said. “If I hadn’t been a trooper I was going to be a wildland firefighter. I was always looking for a job that lets me help people — help my community.”

Villa first joined MHP after returning from a deployment with the United States Army Reserve. Villa said she was on her way to MHP training in Great Falls the day after she got back.

Villa said MHP was her top choice as an employer, noting that the agency is more proactive than much of law enforcement. Additionally, Villa said the large size of MHP plays a major role in the impact she can make.

Villa said some people may avoid a career in law enforcement because of the danger involved, but she was ready for it.

The hardest part for Villa is being the bearer of bad news. She said interviewing families after they’ve lost someone in a crash can be difficult.

Villa said she has to be the composed and calm one in the room and the voice of reason. But in the end, she said it gives them the chance to prepare to move on with their lives.

“I’m a very open people-person,” Villa said. “Being open tends to help the situation be more calm. We actually hire people who are not going to be amped up in situations like that.”

Villa said the best part of the job is seeing someone who’s life she changed for the better. She also said interacting with the public is a great part of the job.

“Sometimes you encounter people who maybe you’ve pulled over or even arrested and they thank you because they’ve learned from that situation,” Villa said. “It means that I won’t wind up having to be there on my traffic homicide duties.”
Lewis and Clark County Sheriff’s Office deputy Greg Holmlund referred to his work in law enforcement as his calling.

“It’s been something I’ve wanted to do since I was just a little kid,” Holmlund said. “I like serving my community. I like helping people.”

Holmlund joined the sheriff’s ranks nearly 10 years ago and spent 15 years with the Helena Police Department reserves prior to that.

“It’s making a difference in your community,” he said. “I was a detective for three or four years where I did nothing but sex crimes and domestic violence, and a lot of times you’re the voice for someone who maybe isn’t in a place to stand up for themselves.”

Holmlund said his youth spent among horses made him the undersheriff’s first pick to care for the nearly 60 neglected horses recently seized from a north valley quarter horse breeding operation.

“When they asked how long I could stay, I told them indefinitely, until the horses go wherever they go,” he said. “I like it. It’s been a nice change.”

For weeks, Holmlund and a dedicated cadre of community volunteers have tended to the horses.

“We’re there every morning at 7 and every night at 6:30 now, and by the time you feed and water and clean up and fix anything the horses have broken, I mean it’s a full time job, but I’ve got some fantastic volunteers helping me out,” he said.

Holmlund was nominated for this recognition by East Helena resident Peggy Cline, who is among the volunteers helping to care for the horses.

“He works tirelessly with volunteers to ensure the best care possible is given to these horses. He has been called away many times for fire duty and/or for special training, however, he has made sure that people have been in place to care for the horses,” Cline wrote in her nomination letter.

“Greg always has a smile on his face and a kind word for everyone—no matter how tired he may be. I consider Greg one of our county’s finest!”

Holmlund said it is always nice to hear someone appreciates his service.

“It’s an honor to know that somebody recognizes the work that we all do,” he said. “It’s a huge team. It’s not just me. There’s many people deserving.”

When asked if he had a mentor or colleague he would like to thank, Holmlund said he has had many over the years.

“There was a lot of people at the Helena Police Department who helped me for years and there’s been a lot of good people at the Sheriff’s Office, training officers, administration,” he said. “That’s a huge list. I couldn’t narrow it down to just one.”

More importantly, he said, “I thank everyone for the opportunity to serve our community.”
STACY SCHMIDT

Longtime Wolf Creek/Craig Volunteer Fire Service QRU Coordinator and Lewis and Clark Search and Rescue volunteer Stacy Schmidt said she was drawn to the work after witnessing a tragedy.

While living in Craig she saw an accident occur on the Dearborn River.

“There were some really high flows on the Dearborn and some people drowned,” Schmidt said. “And I remember just kind of sitting idly by, wanting to help but not capable of helping.”

Not long after, she signed on with then-Fire Chief Rod Boboth’s crew.

“I just loved the people so much,” she said. “It just draws a certain type of people.”

Schmidt said there is a real sense of camaraderie among that...
While the recognition may be well deserved, Schmidt said all first responders in the community and elsewhere are just as deserving. “Those people, they’re all first responders. They’re getting up at all hours of the night to go into the worst of conditions to go help people on probably the worst day of their life and they don’t get paid. They do it because they want to do it.”

“Stacy works tirelessly as a member of the Lewis and Clerk Search and Rescue team and as a volunteer EMT (and firefighter) for the Wolf Creek Fire Department,” Gollehon wrote in the nomination letter. “She devotes nearly all her free time to both organizations, and her skill set and knowledge are truly unmatched. Both organizations are extremely lucky to have her.”

While the recognition may be well deserved, Schmidt said all first responders in the community and elsewhere are just as deserving. “Those people, they’re all first responders,” she said of her fellow volunteers with search and rescue and the fire department. “They’re getting up at all hours of the night to go into the worst of conditions to go help people on probably the worst day of their life and they don’t get paid. They do it because they want to do it.”

She thanked Boboth, current Wolf Creek/Craig Volunteer Fire Service Chief Rocky Infanger and the rest of the volunteers for their guidance throughout her career. “It’s collectively a group of people that I admire and I want to be more like them,” she said.
Sam Alpert says he has always been kind of a thrill-seeker. So several years ago he was bored and drove by a volunteer fire department when the idea hit him that he should join their ranks. And while he is not with the department he originally joined, he is still serving. Alpert calls firefighting a good group activity in which the outcome depends on how the squad functions together. “It’s a team effort,” he said.

“He said he has been with the Tri-Lakes Volunteer Fire Department for about a decade. Previous to that, he had started with Baxendale. He now serves as a firefighter and emergency medical responder. “It’s good to be able to trust that the No. 1 priority is the safety of the respondent.”

PHIL DRAKE
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THOM BRIDGE, INDEPENDENT RECORD

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Alpert, 34, said during the summer the squad was called out two to four times a week and that has tapered off somewhat.

“It comes and goes in waves,” he said. “We are as busy as I care for us to be.”

Alpert, who is the information technology director for the Montana State Bar, encourages others to volunteer.

“I work a full-time job and have three kids and I am also a student,” he said. “The time demand once you are past the training is not that much.”

He said a few hours a week is all it takes to fill an important need.

Alpert said he is not thinking of quitting any time soon.

“You don’t do it this for long without some moments of pause,” he said of responding to accident calls and structure fires.

But he said safety tops the list for all firefighters.

“It’s good to be able to trust that the No. 1 priority is the safety of the respondent.”

Betsy Brandborg, a friend of Alpert, praised Alpert, saying that serving is “a thankless volunteer job, as the distressed people never stop to ask for the names of those helping.”

“That makes no difference to Sam,” she said. “His compassion for our community is his driving force.”

She said he also manages the Tri-Lakes Facebook announcements, “where news travels fast — especially during fire season.”

“His posts there are serious, important AND funny,” she wrote. “Not many people have that skill set.”

“He has such a strong work ethic that he never ignores a call,” she said.

“Sam’s commitment, drive and personal balance absorb the terribly sad and horrific challenges of emergency care, which seem only to cement his ability to do more,” Brandborg said. “Sam will never let his community, his family or his co-workers down.”

Susan Gobbs, another friend who knows Alpert from his state bar job, has watched Alpert’s dedication to the community.

“He is such a blessing for the department,” she said.

Jester had this huge jurisdiction,” Jester said. “Any place that was not in a fee service district was under my jurisdiction, no matter where it was.”

The county’s map shows a service area stretching almost the length of the county in a patchwork of irregular borders. Jester is based at the south end in the Unionville station, which he called the department’s crown jewel.

Testimonials said Jester, who retired from the Montana Department of Transportation, is always responsive and goes above and beyond for the community.

“Wally has dedicated his life to being a first responder and fire fighter,” Unionville resident Anna Baker said. “In doing this, he looks out for the entire community, has created and maintained places for our community to gather and know one another, and is now encouraging young community members to become first responders.”

Jester said getting two new volunteers in a year would be a good number. He said many people just can’t afford to and a lot is asked of firefighters.

Jester used the example of a Sept. 28 apartment complex fire that Lewis and Clark helped out with. He said after firefighters put out the late night fire, they retrieved items for displaced tenants who were missing everything from socks to a shirt.

Jester said the Corral fire in 2012 northwest of Helena was particularly memorable for him. He drove up a road in the Scratchgravel Hills in a fire truck that could be operated from inside the cab.

The first house he reached looked alright, he said, but the next one was threatened by flames with one Department of Natural Resources firefighter working it.

“They have dedicated their whole lives to being a first responder and firefighter,” Unionville resident Anna Baker said. “In doing this, he’s made sure that everyone gets the help they need, and he’s always there when we need him.”

As the DNRC crew got to work, Jester said he heard the engine boss say, “You can go get the next one Pops, we got this one.” That’s when I looked and realized it was my son, with a big old grin on his face.”
Benjamin Fox used to pass out at the sight of blood. As a way to overcome his condition, he took an EMT class on a whim while pursuing a bachelor’s degree in math at Montana State University.

Today Fox is the Montana City station manager for Eagle Ambulance, a position that exposes him to blood and more on a regular basis.

“I found it much more rewarding than teaching math,” he said.

“Now I teach IV classes and get poked 30 times a day, and I’m doing just fine with it.”

Fox grew up in Great Falls and graduated from Helena High School in 2013. He has been with Eagle Ambulance for nearly four years and has been the station manager for about one year.

“He is a committed and passionate Paramedic who adds value to our community every day,” long-time family friend Scott Fabel wrote in Fox’s nomination for this recognition. “Ben seeks out educational opportunities to keep himself current in first responder techniques and does not hesitate to share his new knowledge with his co-workers.”

Fox recently purchased mannequins to train and teach CPR classes throughout the community, Fabel wrote. He’s also the go-to person for new EMTs because of his patience and ability to listen and carefully communicate his knowledge of advanced life support, the nomination letter says.

Fabel credited Fox with streamlining and improving Eagle Ambulance’s operations and procedures and securing funding for badly needed equipment, such as new software that enables 911 dispatchers to connect with first responders on their cellphones.

Fox said one of the most rewarding parts of his job is simply getting to know his patients during transport.

“You get to hear their life story, you get to talk to them, you get to see their eyes light up because someone is paying attention to him,” he said.

The life of a paramedic also has its difficult moments, particularly for his loved ones.

“I ask a lot of my spouse and my family,” he said, adding that it’s not uncommon to make an unplanned trip across the state at the last minute.

“I found it much more rewarding than teaching math.”

Even so, Fox said he is fortunate to work with amazing people and grateful for the opportunity to serve the community.

“Ben Fox is without question one of the most ethical, professional, and understanding Paramedics serving our community,” Fabel wrote. “He is a true hero who thoroughly enjoys helping people in need.”
Angie Granzow had just gotten out of college in 2007 and felt a need to do something different with her life.

She found what she was looking for with the help of the East Valley Fire Department.

Granzow, now a captain, serves as the medical services director. She is in charge of emergency medical technicians on the department and makes sure their training is up to date and that they have the proper supplies.

She had a friend who served on the ambulance crew and she wanted to be part of the team. When she joined the volunteer fire department, members had to be versed in fire and ambulance, she said. She admits she did it somewhat backward, but it turned out to be a perfect fit “and right down my alley.”

“I joined and I never left,” she said.

Maura Gruber, who nominated Granzow for this recognition, praised her dedication.

“She has been a champion with East Valley for as long as I can remember and (is) always willing to train and teach other first responders,” Gruber said. “She is incredible with patients and always taking care of everyone on the fires. She truly is a hero.”

Gruber serves with the Eastgate Volunteer Fire Department, but says she hears Granzow on the radio constantly helping during mutual aid calls. She said she is a great trainer and is always willing to help everybody.

“She is a bright light in the East Valley area,” she said.

Granzow said she loves “the brotherhood” that is involved.

“When I joined I never thought I’d have a second family, as well as 38 brothers,” she said. “They can be a pain in the butt, like a brother can be, but they have my back no matter what.”

Granzow said the department gets twice as many medical calls as fire calls. She said fire calls bring more excitement.

“It carries more of an adrenaline rush because we do not do them so much and we are all adrenaline junkies,” she said.

Granzow said she especially likes helping to protect her community. But she said she has learned over the years to deal with the challenges and sometimes the tragedy the job brings. And she said she has learned how to close a chapter and walk away.

She was born and raised in East Helena, so she said she knows the location of where most of the emergency or fire calls come from, but she encourages residents to display addresses on their homes or make their location easy to find.

When she is not on emergency calls, she is a medical support assistant supervisor for Montana VA Health Care System.

The 38-year-old Granzow said volunteer firefighters typically retire after 20 years. She plans on passing that milestone and staying with the department.

“I have no plans on stopping anytime soon,” she said.
After interning with the Helena Police Department, Kaitlin Jones decided to make a career out of it as a full-time police officer. “It fascinated me back then, and I just have a strong passion for helping people,” Jones said.

Originally from Washington state, Jones graduated from Carroll College in 2017 and has been with the Helena Police Department for the last four years.

“Officer Jones goes above and beyond the call of duty as a police officer for the city of Helena,” said Callie Morris, a friend who nominated Jones for this recognition. “She cares passionately about helping the community and community members. She is always willing to lend a hand to the most vulnerable of people.”

Like many emergency responders, Jones said her job can be hard on her loved ones. After getting married in early October, Jones was back in uniform within a few days but is planning a honeymoon in the spring. “Sometimes it’s hard to make time for the family,” she said.

Despite that, Jones said it is rewarding to know that she has changed and in some cases saved the lives of those she has served. She said it’s particularly rewarding to work the night shift, when the calls tend to be more serious and challenging. “It’s a hard job, but every now and then there are some rewards,” she said.

According to Helena Police Chief Steve Hagen, Jones’ nomination and selection for this recognition are a “direct reflection of all the women and men serving with the Helena Police Department.”

“We expect all of our police officers to go above and beyond when serving the community,” he said. “… The department is proud that Kaitlyn was nominated and will be receiving this award.”

Jones majored in sociology and public health at Carroll College and said she hopes to return to school for her master’s degree and doctorate.

“I’d like to teach criminology or something like that, but I think for now I’ll just stay in this career and see where it takes me,” she said.