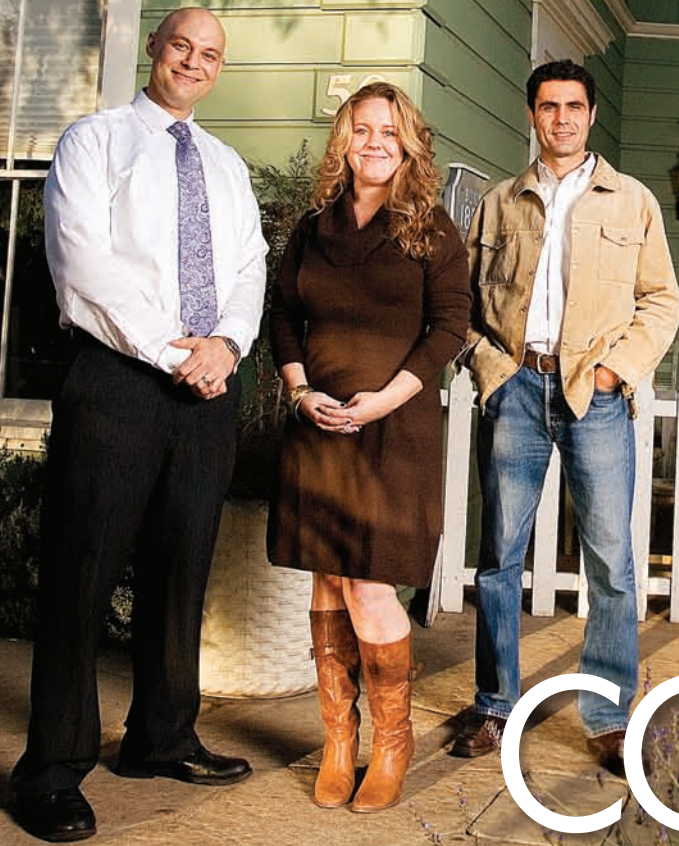


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Photo by Elliot Crowley



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Photo by Kevin Steele

SEARCH & RESCUE



Photo courtesy of Park City Visitors Bureau



OUR COMMUNITY



CALL OF DUTY

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY SEARCH AND RESCUE gives back to the community

BY LAURA BYLUND

PHOTOS BY KEVIN STEELE

8:45AM: County Dispatch receives a call reporting a woman yelling across San Ysidro Canyon for help; she was not visible, but complaining of a leg injury. The Search and Rescue Team is paged to report to headquarters by 9am.

9:05AM: I arrive as the team is stacking packs outside the headquarters door, ready to load into the trucks. The team members are briefed with what is known of the hiker's location, assigned to vehicles and leave in minutes.

9:25AM: As soon as the terrain prevents the trucks from going any further, a "hasty search" team wastes no time getting on the trail. They charge up the hill, plunge down into the canyon (ignoring the poison oak), cross a creek and scramble a steep adjacent cliff, yelling for the woman all along the way.

They gain earshot of her cries from the cliff top, but still no visual. "What color is your jacket?!" The first searcher yells. Others are trying to aid the hasty search by helping navigate from a visual vantage point across the canyon.

10:00AM: They locate the injured hiker at the base of a steep sandstone incline, her tumble halted by a tree trunk. The first rescuer skillfully slides down the gradient and is tossed a med kit. He assumes the role of "Medic 1" and takes an initial assessment of her injuries. The 35-year-old woman is "A & O x4" (alert and oriented to person, place, time and incident) with a femur fracture and possible injuries to her spine. He immobilizes her neck and begins working on her leg. She writhes in pain; the medic holds traction and splints her leg, which seems to help. The other rescuer assesses the situation and call in a "wish list" for supplies and extra hands. They then begin to monitor her vital signs.

10:35AM: Help arrives with a break-apart litter basket, bags of rigging equipment and ropes. They secure the litter in the flattest position possible and prepare to move the patient. It takes four men to transfer the woman into it without shifting her neck or spine. As they strap her in, an intermediate lowering system is fashioned to get her safely down the gully to a spacious ledge just before the main cliff.

11:15AM: From there, they transfer the load to the main system running down the rock face. Another "systems" team has already built the anchor and rigged the lines that Medic 1 and his patient would descend. He clips himself to the litter below her and prepares to lower. The team begins hoisting them toward the edge.

11:40AM: "Hey guys, we're getting a page here!" yells crew member Mike Lomonaco from the top. All action is put on hold as they wait for a report. "Vehicle accident over a cliff

side in Sisquoc." Wrapped and harnessed inside the litter, the woman burrows into her pocket and pulls out her cell phone. "Hi, this is Juanita, what's going on?"

Juanita Smith is President of Santa Barbara County Search and Rescue (SBCSAR). Today she was playing the role of an injured hiker as part of a high-angle rock rescue training; one of two trainings per month.

Search and Rescue is an all-volunteer department of the Sheriff's Office. The Santa Barbara team operates out of



four bases throughout the county and maintains 14 rescue vehicles, has two CARDA certified rescue dogs and about 35 volunteers. They recruit out of the community and are funded primarily through donations and grant writing, with support from the Sheriff's Department.

The crew members all have day jobs and full-time occupations—a mix of accountants, financial planners, computer technicians, teachers, students, business owners, mechanics—yet are on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for the Sheriff's Dispatch Center. Though most are not in the medical or emergency fields by profession, each has at least one medical or rescue-related certification, including

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EMT (some with the Wilderness module), Wilderness First Responder, Swiftwater Rescue Technician (SRTs) and Emergency Vehicle Operator (EVOC).

As a squad, SBCSAR is accredited by the Mountain Rescue Association (MRA). The high-angle rope rescue training day was planned as practice for their Technical Rock re-certification in March. The MRA additionally requires certifications in Winter Operations (i.e. snow avalanche) and Search (i.e. medical, emergency locating transmitters and trailing).

SAR teams in Santa Barbara County have existed in one form or another since 1962. There has been a long complicated history of mergers and branches opening to get to the countywide team in service today. Back in 1996, the north county SAR team won the Higgins-Langley Swiftwater Rescue Award for retrieving a man from a flood moments before his vehicle was swept away. This highly-acclaimed award is internationally recognized and granted only once a year. The individual teams merged into a single resource in 2001 as "Santa Barbara County Search and Rescue," and one thing remains: they are world class.

Something truly impressive and unique about the SBCSAR team is the multiplicity of their skills. Given the variable nature of the terrain, covering all 2,550 square miles of Santa Barbara County seems to necessitate that. Each volunteer has the ability to answer calls ranging from vehicles-over-the-side on mountain roads to swift water rescues in river territory. The team seeks out lost hikers, overdue backpackers, injured mountain bikers and ATV riders, missing children and Alzheimer patients. They respond to downed aircraft sites, search dog requests, stranded motorists or stuck vehicles, and assist in evacuations, body recoveries and even evidence searches. On top of that, they offer their specialized services to mutual aid.

"We are called on to do a lot of stuff out of town as well," said Incident Commander Jim Frank. "It is probably because we have a more broad-based skill set. Most other SAR teams are more focused, but because we have a variety of terrain and outdoor activity here in Santa Barbara, we have to train for all possible scenarios.

"It is a good way to learn what other rescue teams are doing," continues Frank, "and contribute people where we can, because we might need them here someday."

Three crew members returned from Yosemite National Park on a mutual aid mission just days before a monthly incident commander's meeting. (I attended this meeting with an hour's notice.) "I'm sorry I don't have my notes and other stuff with me," I announced, "I came straight from work."

"You'll fit in well here," replied Vice President Steve McNeil with a smile. "I keep my gear in my car. You never know where you'll be when we get paged. Sometimes it makes more sense to go straight to the call."

Despite the long days, late nights, grueling physical challenges and often disturbing sights, everyone in the medical emergency field has love for the excitement and challenge. This is especially true for the volunteers of Search and Rescue; indeed, it is their *only* motivation. The main question in my mind was, "Why do you do this?"

"If you have to ask, you wouldn't understand." Said California Rescue Dog Association (CARDA) Instructor and retired mechanic, Rick Stein. Stein now spends his time traveling the state with Kody, his certified Australian Shepherd, offering volunteer search aid and training other dogs to find each person in any given area.

"We are just a group of people that enjoy the outdoors and this is a way to utilize our skills and give back," explained Jim Frank, who is the founder and president of CMC Rescue, Inc. and a board member of the MRA.

"I work at an IT firm, so it's nice to have a legitimate reason to get out of the office every once and a while," confessed Jon Sullivan. "Plus, it's a hobby! The trainings are fun and it feels good to help people."

"It seems weird, but a lot of us do this for fun," admits Frank. "Otherwise we couldn't do it."

"You don't get desensitized," answered Vice President McNeil, "you just have to enjoy the excitement of it. We see some really ugly things and we see some really good things."

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY SEARCH & RESCUE is an all-volunteer branch of the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department. While the Sheriff's Department provides some funding, most team equipment is purchased through the donation of funds from many charitable foundations and generous individuals. To help support SBSCAR go to: www.sbcsar.org

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