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Volunteer recognized, wins year's supply of coffee

Justina Wang  
Staff writer

(November 21, 2007) — Those who tell the stories of Diana Pfersick's heroics talk about more than the lives she's saved. They tell of the ones she's changed.

Pfersick, the seventh in the country to receive the Dunkin' Brands Community Foundation Serving Heroes award, doesn't wait around for exciting accidents that other volunteer emergency workers flock to.

A longtime nurse at Highland Hospital and a Rush Fire Department volunteer EMT, she responds to "calls no one wants to go on," said Rush Fire Commissioner Bob Faugh. "If someone needs a ride to the hospital, or has a headache, she'll show up."

So one Easter morning several years ago, when a woman's car broke down in Rush, Pfersick jumped aboard the ambulance, eager to help even when there would be no heroic life-saving tale to tell.

When she and Faugh arrived at the scene, they discovered that the woman behind the wheel was pregnant, frantic — and in labor. Calm as always, Pfersick delivered her baby in the ambulance.

She didn't bring anyone back from the brink of death that morning.

"But I can promise you that she has touched more lives and cared for more people than anyone could count," wrote Pfersick's daughter, Lisa Caldwell of Kansas, in a letter nominating her mother for the award, which drew more than 1,300 nominations since July.

Tuesday morning, after a co-worker tricked the nurse educator into a Highland Hospital classroom, Pfersick froze in the doorway as dozens of waiting family and friends cheered and joked that the surprise wasn't an intervention. After 31 years as a full-time nurse, 16 years as an EMT and firefighter, and a life filled with other volunteer work, Pfersick was branded a hero.

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This particular honor, given for the first time to a New Yorker, also came conveniently with a year's supply of Dunkin' Donuts coffee, sure to come in handy on the long days and endless work of a woman devoted to serving others.

"I drink lots of coffee," Pfersick said, with a laugh. "Sometimes I get tired, but the satisfaction just makes you feel good."

A Rochester native, Pfersick decided to become a nurse while in Highland Hospital giving birth to Caldwell. She thought helping others "was pretty neat," so she passed up a job doing artwork and went to nursing school. As her two daughters grew older, she volunteered with their Girl Scout troops and at summer camps, then signed up for firefighter training when Caldwell joined a youth program with the Rush Fire Department.

"She's done this as long as I remember," said younger daughter Amy Burdett of Williamson, Wayne County. "She's never home. She's out helping others."

In the years since, Pfersick has become president and ambulance lieutenant of the Rush Fire Department, cooked meals for other EMT volunteers, joined the Monroe County Volunteer Fireman's Association and the Fireman's Association of the State of New York, and earned her critical care certification to assist other towns with Advance Life Support services.

In between all she's taken on, she also holds the hands of distraught young girls, calms down drivers in broken-down cars, makes no one feel like their problems are too tiny for her heroics.

And besides coffee, that's what keeps her going.

"It's knowing you can make a difference," she said. "No matter how small."

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