

Saving lives is the mission

Volunteers: High school students are part of a team trained to assist in search and rescue efforts.

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On a bitterly cold winter day in December, a woman wandered off from a Columbia homeless shelter and prompted a widespread search by local rescue groups.

Among them was Maryland Search and Rescue, a Howard County-based group of high school students whose mission is to assist professionals in such searches. After several frustrating days, Morgan Rodgers, now a 19-year-old Glenelg High School graduate, entered an apartment building's boiler room and found the woman lying there, trying to keep warm.

"Mind-blowing is the only word I can use to describe it," said Rodgers, who attends Howard Community College. "On a search, we have hundreds of volunteers. The likelihood of being on the team that finds someone is slim. To find the woman was a large vindication of all the training I had done."

Alex Sehman, Rodgers' search team partner, said it was the first time the group had done a search in Columbia. "Normally, we are in Virginia on other troops' turf," he said. "It was amazing to save someone in our own backyard. It also gave validity to our organization. We are a bunch of kids going around saving people."

MSAR, one of six search-and-rescue groups in Maryland, is also a certified mountain rescue team. The group includes males and females, ranging in age from 14 to 21 and adult supervisors who volunteer their services and time in emergency operations in the Mid-Atlantic region.

MSAR 616 is run entirely by high school students. They provide lost-person and downed-aircraft search-and-rescue services when local, state or federal authorities request assistance.

Last weekend, the Maryland Search Teams Task Force held its annual Search and Rescue Expo, open to minor and adult search-and-rescue teams. Among the groups participating was MSAR 616. Along with a full-scale search simulation, the expo featured activities to increase the skill level of member search groups.

Besides joint exercises, the expo provided a forum during which teams discussed issues facing search teams in the state. A main reason for MSAR's participation was the chance to prove its merit and demonstrate members' skills to area adult search-and-rescue groups, Paulding said.

"The training weekend was tremendously challenging, and MSAR did well, proving our training was effective," said Pamela Paulding, an adult leader. "They really held their own, showing they are more than just a group of kids. They are a real search-and-rescue group, a real team."

The group has humble beginnings. Peter McCabe, who founded MSAR in 1981, said his family had been associated with another search-and-rescue group, which had "a lot of issues."

"When I was named scout leader, the previous scout leader threw a fit and left, and the group belonged to him. That is what spurred me on to start [this group]," he said.

MSAR is affiliated with the Boy Scouts of America and is run similarly to a Scout troop. The organization is led by youth members who are elected or appointed to various offices. Advisers to the program, such as McCabe, offer transportation, supervision and direction, and serve as a source in meetings, trips and rescue missions.

The search requests answered are primarily in Virginia but have included regions in New York and Tennessee.

MSAR is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This poses a major issue with high school scheduling and can cause conflicts with school and work schedules. Members say their schools are understanding and tend to classify searches as excused absences. MSAR's policy is that search participation is not mandatory and schoolwork comes first, said Amanda Silber, president of MSAR. She is a senior at Glenelg Country School and has been involved since 2001.

Once on a scene, members coordinate with law enforcement, emergency medical services and local volunteers. They generally work in teams of four to six searchers, combing through wilderness to find victims or evidence of their whereabouts. When found, victims may require medical assistance or evacuation, McCabe said.

MSAR members have two main titles. "Boot" describes newcomers, and they cannot be called for searches. Boots acquire minimum equipment needed for search-and-rescue work, attend a series of regular training meetings and participate in training weekends, McCabe said.

According to MSAR guidelines, the next step is "call-out qualified," which is the lowest level of training required to participate in a search. Call-out qualified members have an understanding of how searches work, basic navigational skills and wilderness survival techniques.

Silber has been involved since 2001 and said that the work has fostered friendships.

"We spend a lot of time hanging out and camping, rock climbing and other outdoor activities," Silber said. "It is a great way to meet people at other schools. We have people from all over the county and some alumni in college who still come back."

The search-and-rescue team meets from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays at Schooley Mill Park in Howard County. Training is often on the weekends and includes wilderness search and rescue, survival skills, navigation, rappelling, rock climbing, technical rescue, communications, advanced first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation., McCabe said.

"The largest rescue I ever participated in was in 1989," McCabe said. "An aircraft carrying six men was on its way from the Outer Banks to Manassas, Va. It was a five-day search with hundreds of men and women scouring the depths of Virginia.

"On the fifth day, it was just our group and the family members, and we found the plane," he said.

"Unfortunately, there were deaths involved. But it helped to provide closure to the families. I am happy to provide a venue in which today's youth can have similar life-changing and life-affirming experiences."