

Local citizens play a part in Concord rescue

Michelle Payne

Appomattox native Debbie Dudley doesn't see herself as a hero. To Dudley, she only did what she believed any person ought to do in a time of need: rise to the occasion.

Dudley, a home health care nurse, is no stranger to empathy that compels her to take action.

On Monday, May 20, at around 6:30 a.m., Dudley was driving home to Appomattox from a visit in Lynchburg. She didn't wake up that morning thinking she'd see a home on fire — let alone save someone's life.

But as she was driving along the Concord Turnpike, Dudley noticed smoke coming from a house.

At first, she surmised that the homeowner was tackling yard work and burning rubbish.

But her gut told her to turn around. Sure enough, the house was on fire.

Dudley said she looked over and noticed another driver on a cell phone.

“‘Are you calling 911,’ I asked. She said ‘yes.’ So I went over to the door and knocked and knocked and knocked,” said Dudley.

“A lot could have gone wrong,” said Dudley as she recounted the events surrounding her role that day.

It was early morning. Knocking furiously on someone's door could have come across as a threat, Dudley said.

“What if he thought I was a robber — the way I was beating on his door? What if it would have been gas and tanks would have blowed up? But you know I don't think about that when I'm trying to help someone. I just go forward,” said Dudley.

A groggy Ronald Hamler, who had been fast asleep and unaware of what was happening to his home, came to the door.

Dudley quickly told him about the fire and ushered him out into the yard. Hamler, in shock, wanted to go inside his home to extract some belongings.

Dudley tried to hold him back and distract him with the help of another local good Samaritan — Melody Keeler, also of Appomattox. Turns out Keeler and Dudley were not strangers to one another.

Keeler said she was on her way to work when she noticed Dudley flagging down drivers for help. She said she pulled over and helped Dudley keep a determined Hamler from re-entering the burning home.

“They wouldn't let me go back in, so I had to concede,” said a grateful Hamler.

This wasn't the first time Dudley was at the right place at the right time.

At last week's board of supervisors meeting, chairman Samuel Carter mentioned that Dudley had rescued someone's life at Granny Bee's some time ago.

When asked about that, Dudley said it was also a moment where she felt compelled to step in and help someone in danger.

“It was a Thursday night. I wasn't supposed to be there. I was to be going somewhere else but plans got canceled,” said Dudley.

Dudley overheard someone asking Verna Knight if she was all right. When Dudley didn't hear a response, she jumped up and saw that Knight was grabbing her throat, unable to speak.

“So I did the choking thing on her. She said she knew she was dying,” Dudley recounted.

Dudley said she doesn't see herself as a hero.

“I don't like the term hero,” said Dudley. She prefers to say that “God had me where he wanted me.”

Being a CNA, Dudley is no stranger to helping others. At this time, she does home health care part time.

“Some people don't want to get involved,” said Dudley, referring back to last week's rescue. “We had bystanders and nobody came except two ladies — one called 911 and the other helped me to keep him from going back in the house ... If you see something like that, attempt to stop. Who knows how many people went by that house ... please jump in.”

Hamler, in spite of losing his home — a home that has been in the family for multiple generations — is grateful to be alive.

“It's good to know people care and that they're observant,” said Hamler. “It makes me more aware. I've never passed a burning house before but I'd like to think that if I had, I'd do the same thing.”

Dudley and Keeler both hope that this story inspires others to step up and help others in need.

“I think God just brought us there at the right time,” said Keeler.

“Someone may have stopped, someone may have not. I don’t know,” said Dudley wondering at what may have transpired if she, Keeler and the unknown Samaritan who made the 911 call had not paused to do their part.

“You can’t just say, ‘Oh somebody else will do it,’” said Keeler. “‘Or I’m not gonna stop because I won’t know what to do.’ I think your instincts will just show you what to do — God’s gonna show you what to do. Wherever you are, you are put there for a reason.”

Lorena Parsons sews with one arm

Michelle Payne

Her physical aches, pains and disabilities do not keep her down. At least not for long. Lorena Parsons, in spite of a stroke that took away control of her left arm, continues to sew with her right arm.

At 87 years old, one could say Parsons, of Oakville, is as spunky as ever (she just had her birthday Tuesday). From her wheelchair, she'll tell people that she's as independent as possible — she only asks for help if she believes it's necessary.

While there's a bit of time spent on her back due to injuries, she keeps busy while she's in her wheelchair.

"I used to never lay down in the daytime. I never knew what it was to stop (during the day) until I had my stroke. That kinda slowed me up. Haven't been the same ever since," said Parsons.

She said she still sews and cooks — she even makes pies and cakes for friends and loved ones.

Parsons even wheels herself around the house, navigating the furniture in her home. Her daughter Rinda suggested moving some of the furniture out of the living room for Parsons' best interest.

Parsons was quick to reply that the furniture is fine just where it is. She can manage. And she does.

When asked if she's always been determined and stubborn, Parsons said she'd describe herself as determined but perhaps not stubborn.

If one thing is certain, Parsons had a determined enough streak within her to learn how to sew in spite of her paralyzed arm. The paralyzation came about due to a stroke she suffered about 18 years ago.

After her husband passed away about two years ago, Parsons found herself putting her best foot forward to sew with one arm. It's what takes up most of her time these days.

"I had to do something instead of staring at the walls and going crazy," said Parsons.

She'd been sewing since she was a little girl.

"When I was growing up, I made most of my dresses," Parsons explained.

It made sense to start "sewing a lot more."

Her loss was the impetus to fill her time with the craft of sewing.

Parsons, beaming with pride, showed off her many pieces of work: potholders, blankets constructed with pieces of fabric, placemats, table runners — all crafted by her. She even showed off some curtains she put together in the kitchen and pillows that accented her sofa.

"My son in North Carolina says, 'Mama, it's amazing how you do that with one hand,'" she said.

Every project she tackles carries its own special touch. Whether it's the arrangement of the fabric pieces, the pops of color in some creations or the neutral color themes in others — every sewing project is different. And it's all done with her own hand.

"I've made them for grandbabies, great grandbabies, friends — everybody. I couldn't even guess to think how many I've made," she said of her patterned blankets.

Parsons doesn't hesitate when asked what advice she'd give to others.

"Never give up. You can always find a way to do most anything you try to do ... or at least that's the way I find it," said Parsons.

"When something comes up that needs to be done, some people think (to themselves), 'Well I can't do that,'" she continued. "That doesn't even pop into my mind. I don't think, 'I can't do that.' I just go at it, figure out a way to do it. If you give up, you're not gonna get anything done."

The Appomattox Health & Rehabilitation Center wrote a post about Parsons doggedness in the face of adversity.

"We are so proud of this amazing woman! Lorena Parsons suffered a stroke which paralyzed her on her left side. Through hard work and perseverance, she is able to accomplish tasks with one arm that many people cannot complete with two. She is a shining example of where there's a will, there's a way."

The center hopes that Parsons' story inspires other stroke victims to "never give up."

African American banjoists honored at park's annual banjo festival

Michelle Payne

Visitors to the Appomattox Court House National Historical Park on Saturday were welcomed by the sounds of live music and a welcoming word from tour guides highlighting the banjo and its history. This year's Joel Sweeney and the Banjo Festival featured a dedication ceremony to highlight the newly installed Virginia State Historical Marker honoring the African American banjoists who passed on their music knowledge to Joel Sweeney.

While Sweeney popularized the banjo, it was the African American banjoists who taught him how to play.

"We honored enslaved African American banjoists who taught Joel Sweeney how to play the banjo with the dedication of this historic highway marker," said park superintendent Robin Snyder in retrospect. "It was our way of paying tribute to these musicians who did not have a voice so many years ago."

The efforts put forth in making the marker and dedication ceremony a reality did not go unnoticed as Snyder pointed out that it was a team effort.

"We are grateful to our partners who made this possible: The Appomattox 1865 Foundation for funding the marker; the Virginia Department of Historic Resources who helped us design the marker; and the Virginia Department of Transportation who installed it along the Appomattox River pull-off where history was made," Snyder continued.

The ceremony featured a keynote address by the park's museum tech, David Wooldridge and two songs by Dom Flemons. Flemons is a Grammy award winner and a two-time Emmy nominee.

Flemons later wrote to his Facebook followers, "Today was a very powerful day at "The Joel Sweeney Banjo Festival" ... I was asked to serve as an Ambassador to the African American roots music community because the occasion was to unveil a new historical marker that explicitly honors the unknown black banjo players who taught a young Joel Sweeney how to pick the banjo, that he would later go on to share on the world stage. While we do not know their specific names, Sweeney emphasized the importance of their influence on his music."

The banjo festival began at 9 a.m. and ran until 5 p.m. with live music, reenactors, and guided tours to help visitors celebrate the musical history of the banjo.

Reenactors could be found sitting inside the Charles Sweeney cabin plucking away at their instruments and interacting with visitors. The cabin was restored thanks to the efforts of The Appomattox 1865 Foundation. It's where Joel Sweeney's family lived, today a symbol of the banjo's launch into popularity.

"We want to keep this tradition alive," said a reenactor, Tom Lather, from North Carolina. Lather, period correct banjo in hand, was looking forward to joining the musicians at the Sweeney cabin.

"As banjo enthusiasts, we want everyone to experience the joy that we have," said reenactor Dave Culgan.

He added that the banjo was an important social phenomenon.

Another reenactor, Mark Weems added that as far as can be known, Joel Sweeney was the first to mix black and white music. The cabin, to Weems, was representative of that pivotal moment in music history.

James Pentecost, another musician who was also reenacting, said the banjo was a big part of the Civil War soldier's downtime. For him, learning to play the banjo was part of bringing reenactment to life.

Reenactors such as Pentecost and his friends contribute much to keeping a historically accurate representation of the past, bringing places such as the historical park to life.

The festival wrapped up with a concert featuring Flemons and the Sweeney Players.