

https://newsadvance.com/community/nelson_county_times/news/high-school-graduate-adds-emt-certification-scholarship-to-growing-list-of-accomplishments/article_c1607ba4-f6e7-5f76-811e-a611f3f3bfc7.html

High school graduate adds EMT certification, scholarship to growing list of accomplishments

Nick Cropper
Aug 13, 2020



Wintergreen Fire & Rescue EMT and volunteer Macy Bryant, seen here in this summer 2020 photo, has been with the department for more than a year.

Lee Luther Jr.

Macy Bryant has found a home away from home at the Wintergreen Fire & Rescue station in Nellysford and a second family among the members of B shift.

At 17, Bryant has been a volunteer with the Wintergreen Fire Department and Wintergreen Rescue Squad for almost a year and is one of the youngest volunteers with the department. What little free time she has between school and a part-time job

she usually will spend at the Nellysford station or occasionally at another station located in Lovingston.

“They’ve really taken me on as part of the crew,” Bryant said. “There’s definitely just one thing of having fun here and going on calls but there’s another thing when you have those friendships and those relationships and that trust with people here because I know that they have my back,” Bryant said.

She received her EMT certification Aug. 4 through a course she took at Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center (CATEC), graduated from high school and will be taking classes at Piedmont Virginia Community College to continue her emergency medical services education.

At PVCC, Bryant will take prerequisite classes until she turns 18 and can enter into the paramedic program, which she said is a two-year program. During that time, she also plans to get additional certifications, including her Firefighter 1 and 2 certifications and hazmat certification.

And in late July, Bryant was awarded the EMS Award for outstanding Contribution to EMS by a High School Senior scholarship in the Thomas Jefferson region, which will help pave the way for her continued education.

Bryant said she was shocked to learn she won the \$1,000 scholarship after she was encouraged by Wintergreen Fire & Rescue Chief Curtis Sheets to complete the application.

“I feel like I’ve accomplished a lot more than what I expected I was going to accomplish. It’s amazing. I didn’t expect it to happen all like this,” Bryant said, adding those accomplishments will continue to motivate her.

According to the Virginia Department of Health website, the scholarship, which is available to 11 total regional EMS councils in the state, is awarded to a high school senior who has been affiliated with an EMS agency for at least six months and who is currently or will enroll in a institution of higher learning or accredited Advanced Life Support training program in the coming year.

“She’s got such a great personality and is certainly worthy of that award. It is there for junior members going above and beyond that minimum standard and that is certainly descriptive of what she’s doing,” Sheets said.

Sheets noted Bryant has jumped into any training opportunity she could get and has progress quickly except for a couple months early on in the COVID-19 pandemic where her involvement in EMS was limited. However, Bryant said she used those couple months to dig deeper into firefighting and hone her skills there.

“She is a pleasure to have. She’s what you hope your kid to grow up to be like,” said Jeremiah Fish, captain of B shift. “Just even training she is super engaged, she wants to get as much training as she can, she’s super passionate about helping people so all those things are good qualities.”

B shift is one of three rotating shifts that operate a combined 24 hours per day and seven days per week.

Being tapped as the Thomas Jefferson EMS council winner pits her against 10 other regional winners for the chance to win an additional \$5,000 scholarship, although she won’t learn if she’s won until September, she said.

Bryant credits winning the scholarship to her different support systems, from her fellow members of the Wintergreen station to her family. The investment in her from others has been a humbling experience, she said.

“It’s hard if you try to do things on your own because you’re just leaving everything on yourself. It’s not a good, healthy thing to do,” Bryant said. “My resources have definitely been strong.”

Fish said “it would not surprise me one bit” if Bryant took home the statewide scholarship. Fish is one of the three people who completed letters of recommendation for Bryant to be eligible for the initial scholarship. The other two individuals were Sheets and her instructor at CATEC.

The application requires individuals answer a series of questions, including what inspired them to pursue EMS and what they would improve with the current EMS system in Virginia.

From what she's observed, especially in volunteer stations, Bryant said she felt like training for volunteers could be improved. Being a volunteer herself, she recognizes how much they give back to the county, but staff could benefit from more EMS training.

"[T]here's so many different things I feel like we could be doing more of to be better prepared for those patients that we have because sometimes we'll sit around here and we won't get a call for two shifts ... but we could use that time we have and be more intentional about using that time to prepare for those calls," Bryant said

As Bryant describes it, public service is a foundation of her family and her upbringing. Several other members of her family, including her grandfather, brother, cousin and uncle, all are firefighters as well. She especially drew a lot of her inspiration from her father, who never took an interest in being a first responder.

Bryant's father was a preacher in a nursing home since she was young. It was this passion for helping others that she saw in her father, her sister who is a certified nursing assistant, and the other firefighters in her family that led her down her path in public service.

Bryant's ultimate goal is to become a missionary, but that does not diminish the importance of the work she does now and her passion to turning her current volunteer work into a career. When deciding what education she wanted to pursue, Bryant said she was torn between the two fields but she decided to go the paramedic route and use what she is learning now to help prepare her for goal of missionary work.

"Missionary work can come later on in the future, but I'm really soaking up EMS and firefighting right now," Bryant said.

Sheets said because of Bryant's age there are certain aspects of the job she is not allowed to participate in. For example, until she turns 18 she is not allowed to stay overnight at the station and is missing out on night operations as a result.

"There are certain things we have to hold her back from because she's not 18 yet; once she turns 18 I expect we'll see even more from her," Sheets said.

https://newsadvance.com/community/nelson_county_times/news/maintaining-volunteer-numbers-in-county-stressed-by-pandemic-officials-say/article_1fd4c2ab-fa43-56d9-8c06-4fb30c1f09f6.html

Maintaining volunteer numbers in county stressed by pandemic, officials say

Nick Cropper
Dec 9, 2020



Wintergreen Fire & Rescue EMT and volunteer Macy Bryant, seen here in this summer 2020 photo, has been with the department for more than a year.

Lee Luther Jr.

In a county dominated by volunteer fire and rescue groups, some departments are struggling to fill volunteer positions, often times forcing other agencies to take the call -- often paid agencies.

Historically, working to maintain volunteer numbers in the county is not a new endeavor, but some fire and safety officials have found the coronavirus pandemic has become an additional stressor.

Nelson County Emergency Services Coordinator Russel Gibson pointed to factors outside the COVID-19 pandemic as also contributing to low numbers. He noted a booming private sector, a rise in two-income households or simply people volunteering in capacities that do not translate to public safety as all being contributing factors.

The struggle to maintain volunteer numbers in the county is a trend years in the making. Having been in public safety for roughly 16 years, Gibson said a lot of public safety departments are "starving for volunteers."

Rescue Captain Joseph Johnson, with Gladstone Volunteer Fire and Rescue service, said having well-staffed volunteer fire and EMS services was a benefit to both quality of life in the area as well as public safety.

"We're not all around all the time and it's important to have multiple people so you can get calls covered. You also want to have highly trained people," Johnson said. "Also it's saving the county money and in the end it's saving the tax payers in the county."

Despite being critical to Nelson County's fire and rescue infrastructure, Gibson said the shortage being seen in the county is symptomatic of nationwide trends in volunteerism. Gibson said it was important to have a "deep bench" of volunteers to draw from, especially on the EMS side.

"I would say some of our agencies are probably on that cusp where if we lose another driver our response times are going to go up because they have to pull from somewhere farther away," Gibson said. "We have relatively few times when they absolutely can not go at all."

From the beginning of the year through the end of September, Gibson said all agencies in the county reported responding to more than 97% of calls that went out and those numbers have stayed consistent.

"The danger is then is it 10, 15 volunteers running those calls or is it just four and are they going to get burnt out?" Gibson said.

He said in those instances where an agency could not respond, for example if the department was tied up on another call, other departments either in or along county lines would step in to help.

"We're agriculturally focused most of the time," Gibson said. "Because it can be seasonal and depends on those revenues, having all paid crews would be very, very expensive for a county our size to support that kind of infrastructure."

Chief of Wintergreen Fire and Rescue Curtis Sheets said this year the department has lost a number of active volunteers because they are either high risk themselves or have family that is considered to be in a high-risk category for the virus. The losses were higher at the onset of the pandemic.

"Most of our volunteer ambulance drivers are retirees. We have a fair amount of folks who were thinking they need to stay away," Sheets said, adding some volunteers have decided to come back since while others have chosen to remain away from volunteer duties.

The Wintergreen department has a mix of volunteer and paid staff. Nelson EMS, however, is all paid staff, Sheets said.

Johnson also confirmed the Gladstone department has lost some volunteers as a result of the virus, but he also noted volunteer numbers have "waned" in the last couple years for various reasons.

Johnson said there only are a core few individuals running a majority of EMS calls and the department has seen a drop in calls it is able to answer as a result of losing volunteers.

Gladstone Volunteer Fire and Rescue has an "immense" first due area -- the area that a specific fire company or station is expected to arrive first when dispatched -- Johnson said, covering parts of Amherst, Appomattox, Buckingham and Nelson counties.

"Ideally you want a very short response time but if it's the third or fourth call that might not happen because the ambulance is coming from the opposite side of the county. And that's not a Nelson problem that's an everywhere problem," Sheets said.

Sheets noted there was an inherent difference in the work that is required of fire and EMS volunteers. He said the volunteer fire departments, while they could always use more volunteers, are usually "very strong" because the job is more approachable, although it can be more physically demanding.

At Wintergreen, however, demographics in the area often times are older or retired, which doesn't necessarily translate to the demands of being a firefighter.

"At Wintergreen we struggle a whole lot more with volunteers on the fire side because the demographics of our community don't necessarily align with the work of a firefighter," Sheets said.

Recruitment efforts and donations for the Gladstone department also have stalled because of the pandemic, Johnson said.

"We have an extremely difficult time recruiting people here because of the area where Gladstone sits is impoverished for the most part," Johnson said. "I have an extremely difficult time recruiting people there's just nobody to recruit from."

According to Sheets, offering training within the county is one of the better ways to build up volunteer ranks in rural areas. He added Nelson County began offering one year ago a full EMT class within the county with priority going to anybody wanting to volunteer locally. Departments like Gladstone also offer to pay for training in some cases.

A lot of training is either reimbursed or paid for completely by the agency out of either state or county funds, Gibson said, and those certifications are transferable or often translate to paid jobs.

Gibson said it would be ideal to have volunteer positions filled at all times, but there were "definite benefits" to the volunteers the county does have.

"... [T]he people we do have are usually very dedicated. Many of them run with multiple agencies if they can. Some of them work for paid crews or have retired and then volunteer after hours because they are dedicated and they care about what they do," Gibson said.

https://newsadvance.com/nelson_county_times/news/moving-in-slow-gear-emergency-services-adjust-to-pandemic/article_0466dcc5-132d-590d-87d8-1d482ccddff4.html

'Moving in slow gear': Emergency services adjust to pandemic

Nick Cropper
Apr 8, 2020



Leza Sisley places a container of disinfectant wipes on the shelf of an ambulance during a cleaning last week.

Justin Faulconer

Emergency services across Nelson County are taking extra precautions in order to safely continue operations during the pandemic.

However, COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, has hit some departments harder than others.

Chief of Wintergreen Fire and Rescue Curtis Sheets said the virus has affected almost every part of the agency's operations. Even something as simple as having maintenance done on one of the ambulances can be a challenge, as they have to find

the needed parts and a shop that's open to make the fix.

Turnaround times for ambulances to come back into the county after dropping a patient off at a hospital have lengthened because of the added sanitizing and cleaning practices, which he said were necessary.

"Everybody is moving in slow gear to make sure we don't make a mistake that will contaminate something that could have been avoided," Sheets said of the extra precautions.

Other emergency services departments in Nelson County, like the Lovingston Fire Department and Nelson County Sheriff's Office, also are taking extra precautions when it comes to sanitizing.

Nelson County Sheriff David Hill said in an email his deputies are encouraged to follow recommended guidelines by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and extra cleaning and sanitizing is taking place. He said deputies also are encouraged to use appropriate personal protective equipment, but he noted there has been a limited supply.

As an essential function of local government, work at the sheriff's department continues on regardless of the pandemic. Deputies with the sheriff's department have continued to answer calls that come into dispatchers, but Hill said if calls can be handled by phone, then deputies are recommended to do so.

If a call requires an in-person response, deputies are encouraged to practice social distancing and staff deputies also have continued to make arrests when warranted.

"With this in mind, we try to take every precaution possible, but sadly we're still taking a risk of being exposed. Public safety and those in the medical field are currently on the front line," Hill said via email.

Sheets said Wintergreen Rescue has responded to some calls already where the caller failed to pass along the information they had symptoms of COVID-19. He said EMS would have responded to the call regardless with no change in their response time, but

because that information was not shared, emergency personnel were not ready when they arrived on scene.

“If we get into a bad situation and we were not protected, I could lose access to that crew for an extended period of time ... it has a ripple effect really on everybody,” Sheets said.

Sheets said so far three of his staff have had to be quarantined as a way to minimize risk to the department. Of those three, two had been in contact with a patient who was “presumptive positive” and the third had a fever and a cough.

He said in an email they were quarantined awaiting test results and all three tested negative for the virus. All are now back on the job.

EMS personnel are equipped with gowns, masks and goggles to keep them safe when out in the field. Sheets said they would use the equipment on every call if that were possible, but must pick and choose based on the information they receive from dispatchers because of limited supplies.

Of all the resources his department needs, Sheets said the demand for masks is front and center as well as a need for more gowns. Wintergreen Fire and Rescue have received masks through donations, but the department currently is considering ways to properly disinfect and reuse supplies.

“It’s kind of ironic because if a paramedic had reused those supplies a month ago they would be facing disciplinary action, but now it’s going to become routine practice,” Sheets said.

Shortages of personal protective equipment aren’t the only challenge the Wintergreen department has had to try and get around.

As a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, some volunteer drivers who are in the high-risk age range have decided to take themselves out of rotation, a decision Sheets said he fully supports.

“Several of them have chosen to sit this out ... which I fully support, but the way we have had to react to that is to hire more staff,” Sheets said.

Within its budget, Wintergreen was set to hire more staff members in the fourth quarter — starting in October — but they have had to accelerate the hiring process in order to fill those gaps.

“I think in the end that’s going to be a pretty key element to getting through this,” Sheets said of the early hires.

The department even has turned to an unlikely source to help fill its driver shortage. Sheets said they’ve trained snow plow drivers and other operators of heavy equipment in a crash course to become ambulance drivers.

So far they have trained seven drivers in the crash course, Sheets said.

The department has reviewed rules and regulations related to emergency driving, radio system, traffic flow and parking layouts at each of the four hospitals it transports to. Drivers also reviewed different medical equipment

Daniel Johnson, chief of the Lovington Fire Department, said one of the bigger precautions his department is taking is putting one of its trucks in a “bubble” as he called it.

“We’ve tried to isolate one truck, so if we do ever run into a situation where we have contamination we still have one truck that is ready to go regardless. That way if something happens not everything is contaminated in one call,” he said.

Other than isolating an engine, Johnson said the department is taking all the prescribed safety precautions, including maintaining a 10-person limit at the station and shutting its doors to the general public — a practice other emergency services, like Wintergreen, has taken.

In addition to those measures, the Lovington Fire Department has changed some of its protocols to minimize risk to the department.

For example, Johnson said before the virus, when the Lovington department responded to a beeping fire alarm in a home, the entire crew would enter the structure and assess the situation. Now, whenever possible, they will send only a single person into the structure.

Unlike the volunteer shortage the Wintergreen Rescue Squad is facing, Johnson said the department, which is volunteer-based as well, has not had any issues so far with keeping volunteers.

He said if volunteers would rather not work during this time he would support that decision.

In spite of their struggles, however, Sheets said the community has stepped up to help out however it can.

“That is at the very top of my list of things that I enjoy working in the Nelson County community. The community does appreciate the work you’re doing and will work with you every step of the way, all you have to do is ask,” Sheets said.

Hill echoed Sheets’ sentiment.

“I must say during this difficult time, the county officials and county citizens have been great,” Hill said in an email. “We’re all on the same team, attempting to limit exposures, while being hopeful that those impacted recover soon.”

Nick Cropper covers Nelson County. Reach him at (434) 385-5522.

Nick Cropper covers Nelson County. Reach him at (434) 385-5522.