Connect to Community: UA Employees Serve as Search-and-Rescue Volunteers

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It's no secret that the UA's outstanding employees help make the campus a great place to be. But countless UA employees also devote time and energy to giving back to the greater Tucson community, either in their free time or as part of their University positions.

From volunteering with nonprofits to coordinating creative fundraisers, the work being done by campus employees makes a big difference to those in need.

In this regular "Connect to Community" series, we will highlight some of the inspiring work UA employees are doing in the community.

Southern Arizona is known for its picturesque mountain ranges and scenic hiking trails that epitomize the unique beauty of the Southwest.

Yet for those who are unprepared, are unfamiliar with the desert's scorching temperatures or fall victim to unforeseen circumstances, a trip into the great outdoors can turn dangerous very quickly.

For those in need, there's the Southern Arizona Rescue Association, a group of community volunteers trained in all aspects of wilderness rescues, including cave, cliff and swift water rescues. Among the association's 185 volunteers, there are numerous UA employees and students.

The Southern Arizona Rescue Association, also known as SARA, was established in 1958 as a nonprofit, all-volunteer search and rescue organization serving southern Arizona and Pima County. It is funded by donations and public funding and helps supplement the efforts of other rescue operations.

Earlier this summer, the association was honored with the 2014 Al Schoenstene Search and Rescue Unit of the Year Award from the Arizona Search and Rescue Coordinators Association.

SARA typically responds to more than 100 calls each year, putting in 4,400 hours of volunteer time. Field volunteers are required to be in good physical condition and complete a variety of extensive first-aid and rescue trainings conducted by SARA volunteers.

When he's not working as a graphic artist in the Facilities Management Paint and Sign Shop, Bill Florence spends hours each week as a dedicated SARA volunteer. He has been involved with the association for more than 13 years and has performed nearly every role within the organization, from helping with helicopter rescues to working in operations and administration.

Florence has been on more than 780 rescue missions and spent nearly 3,000 hours in the field.

"I joined because I love the outdoors and have always wanted to help others," he said. "I think helping people that are truly in life-and-death danger is addictive. The feeling you get from really making that big of a difference in someone's life is impossible to describe and it's a feeling the world could use more of."

When the Pima County Sheriff's Department receives a 911 call with a search-and-rescue component, the department often will contact SARA for support. SARA then issues a page to volunteers' cell phones, and volunteers who are available respond to the call. In serious medical cases, volunteers will transport the person in need out of the field to an ambulance, so they can be taken to a hospital.

Florence described one call in which a grandmother and three children took a wrong turn and got lost on a rainy, snowy day atop Mount Lemmon. They traveled for more than a mile-and-a-half in the wrong direction before the sun set.

"I remember how the grandma started to cry when we walked up," Florence said. "She thought her simple mistake had killed her family and us finding them gave them all new life. It didn't get any press (and) was never in the news. ... But if doing good like that doesn't motivate, nothing will."

Shelley Littin, a communications specialist for the iPlant Collaborative, has been involved with SARA for two years. In addition to assisting with rescue missions, she also helps with the association's communications and media relations.

"I am primarily motivated in mountain rescue by the missions themselves," Littin said. "Knowing someone is in trouble and that I have the skills and knowledge to help them, I feel I have a responsibility to be there and to render whatever aid I
can. And the chance to work with the amazing group of people and the diverse talents they bring to our rescue team is tremendous inspiration."

Matthew Knatz, senior information technology support analyst for the Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology [4], has volunteered for SARA for eight years. Although he holds many roles within the association, he is primarily a trainer for rope rescue techniques. He also serves as a driver to transport equipment on search-and-rescue calls.

"I enjoy working with other members in the group and I think the cause is worthwhile," he said. "I also like being outside in the wilderness. ... Our organization is full of people who love to be outdoors."

Lee Ryan, a professor of psychology at the UA, is a trained wilderness emergency medicine technician. She has been involved with SARA for 15 years and leads the association's medical training efforts.

"I love outdoor activities, like hiking and climbing," said Ryan. "This is a chance to give something back to the community and support others who love the outdoors. And it's incentive to keep myself fit as well."

Anjani Polit, the Uplink Operations Lead for the HiRISE camera [5], said she joined SARA two years ago as a way to turn her interest in hiking and volunteering into a way to give back to the community. She serves on missions, as well as on the recruitment committee and as a member advocate for SARA.

"I continue to be involved in SARA because it is very rewarding," Polit said. "SARA members are a very dedicated group of volunteers with a common purpose, and no matter what I am doing to help out, I am contributing to that purpose while also spending time with fellow volunteers I like and respect."

Polit said that she has found volunteering for SARA extremely rewarding.

"Nothing beats the rush of finding a lost hiker, but I also get a great sense of satisfaction from helping my teammates carry gear out of the field," she said. "I really do feel that I am making a difference and having a direct impact on people."

SARA accepts all volunteers who are interested in enhancing public outdoor safety in Arizona. If you are in good physical condition and interested in learning how to volunteer with SARA, visit sarci.org/sara [3].

Are you a UA employee who's working to make a difference in the community? Do you know of an employee or group on campus that is doing something unique to give back? If so, let us know about it by emailing uaatwork@email.arizona.edu [6]. Your story could be featured in a future edition of Lo Que Pasa.

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