

POINTS OF LIGHT: There when you need them

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Ron Christensen of Nampa does not think of himself as a hero, although he checks off all the boxes. The same goes for the more than 100 volunteers associated with the nonprofit Idaho Mountain Search and Rescue.

They are not in it for money or recognition.

Christensen, 67, is a coordinator for the rescue operation and has spent 12 years either leading or participating in back-country missions. As with other volunteers, holidays are not a given for “peaceful” time with the family.

“Over the years, I’ve been out during every holiday on the calendar,” he said.

“Operations never happen at a convenient time, but when we are sent out on a call, we have an expectation to respond and be at our compound within an hour. That means that people are literally dropping whatever they are doing and going to where they need to be within an hour’s time.”

For no pay.

And along the way, rescue teams often are navigating extreme weather and fighting through darkness – from the desert in Owyhee County to the terrain of the Sawtooths and Boulder White Clouds.

Idaho Mountain Search and Rescue is not a high-profile operation by any means. Every year, some of the volunteers can be seen selling hot-buttered corn at the Western Idaho State Fair, the organization’s major fund-raising venture. But few people have reason to think much about the group.

Until they are needed, somewhere in the backcountry of Idaho, Oregon and Nevada. And it’s an operation that local sheriffs can’t do without.

Four years ago, the rescue group was a matter of life and death for Connor Bass, who at that time was a student at Boise State University. Bass was snowboarding at Bogus Basin when he went off the course and basically into no-man’s land. The ski patrol had an idea where he went, but couldn’t locate him.

To say the least, it was an eventful time for the rescue team, Connor and his frantic mother (Tara Schaak), who spent the night wondering if her son was alive. The temperature was somewhere around 20 degrees and Connor was not dressed for the occasion.

There is a happy ending to this one. Darryl Beemer, who was part of the rescue team, found Connor and it was all smiles and hugs. Connor was cold, tired and hungry, but otherwise OK.

“All in all, it was pretty straight forward from our standpoint, although it was an unexpected long night for somebody who was out there,” Christensen says. “We’re always glad to see a positive outcome, then we quietly and humbly put away our gear and prepare for the next call.”

Not all calls end up with positive outcomes.

“During the year, we average around 40 missions. Sometimes, an operation ends up being a recovery, and that’s important too,” he says. “There’s satisfaction that comes from this, and parts of it we enjoy. We all like the outdoors, the friendships and the camaraderie and, obviously, we like helping people. You work with a lot of good people and multiple law-enforcement agencies. All have a common goal – to make a difference.”

Ask Tara Schaak about the difference the Idaho Mountain Search and Rescue makes. “I write to them every year to thank them for how they changed our lives,” she said.

To her son, Connor, his experience four years ago put him on a career path. Now 25, he’s a firefighter in the small town of Poulsbo, WA.

“When going into firefighting, I was asked ‘why.’ For me, my ‘why’ is that I’ve been in a situation when I needed emergency services to come to my rescue. They showed up with all the tools, technologies and everything they had to provide that service to me. They also had the level of empathy that will always be with me.” he said.

“I’m the goofball that got lost, but they were not judgmental, rather they were like a new set of friends that I found,” he said. “For me, as a firefighter, that is something I will always take with me – understanding what it’s like to need help, then providing that help with empathy and no judgments. So, that’s my ‘why.’ I want to show up for other people when they need it and show up really well.”

That’s what’s called paying it forward.