

The Saga of Pat, Mike, and Car 43

By CHARLES RANDISI

Pat and Mike rode the 24-hour 9 a.m. - 9 a.m. shift for National Ambulance's rig 43 on Thursday, May 2. I rode "shotgun" with them from 4 to 8 p.m., a sixth of their working day.

You have to be a crazy fool to work for National Ambulance full-time, 72 hours a week, as Pat and Mike do. You also have to be dedicated, concerned, skilled, professional, and all those other adjectives reserved for the finest of Boy Scouts.

Mike Kuder was cradling a canister of oxygen when I met him. He introduced me to his assistant, Pat Wynne, the first and so far the only female ambulance attendant ever hired by National.

Our first assignment was to Strong Memorial Hospital, to transfer a patient to Monroe Community Hospital, or "Mocoho," as they say over the two-way radio.

"Car 43 green to Strong," Kuder spoke to the dispatcher over the ambulance mike. And we were off.

No siren or flashing lights this time. A transfer is one of the most routine jobs an ambulance crew handles. We had time to chat on the way from National's University Avenue headquarters to Strong Hospital.

Kuder, who drove, has been with National for four years. Wynne is a six-month rookie.

All attendants take a standard first aid course as part of their training, Kuder said. Later, an advanced course will entitle one to a state certificate.

"At least one person on every crew must be certified," Kuder said.

Sixty-five drivers and attendants are employed with National, the largest service in Rochester. Some work 24-hour shifts; some work straight days or evenings; and some work part-time.

The reason the company carries a permanent ad in the help wanted columns is the big turnover of employees, Kuder said. "Some can't adjust to the hours, and some can't adjust to the work itself."

National has two stations, the one on University, and a small outpost at St. Bernard's Seminary (obtained through the efforts of the Holy Cross human development committee).

"We have quite a few rigs on the road," Kuder said. Most are Cadillacs with big engines and automatic transmissions.

He talked about his reasons for his choice of job. "I had some experience when I was in the service, and I knew it was interesting work. Every call is different."

He said, "I've learned to meet people to talk to people. It's not really romantic work, but things get pretty dramatic at times. You'd never believe some of the things we get to see."

He pulled the rig up to the emergency entrance at the hospital. "Car 43 out Strong," he said to the dispatcher.

The crew took the stretcher up to the patient's room. He was a Medicaid patient, 50 years old, and had tubes going and coming out of him. He looked emaciated.

The man was carefully moved from bed to stretcher, wrapped in a blanket, and taken, tubes and all, to the ambulance. Wynne held the man's intravenous feeding bottle high as they carried him.

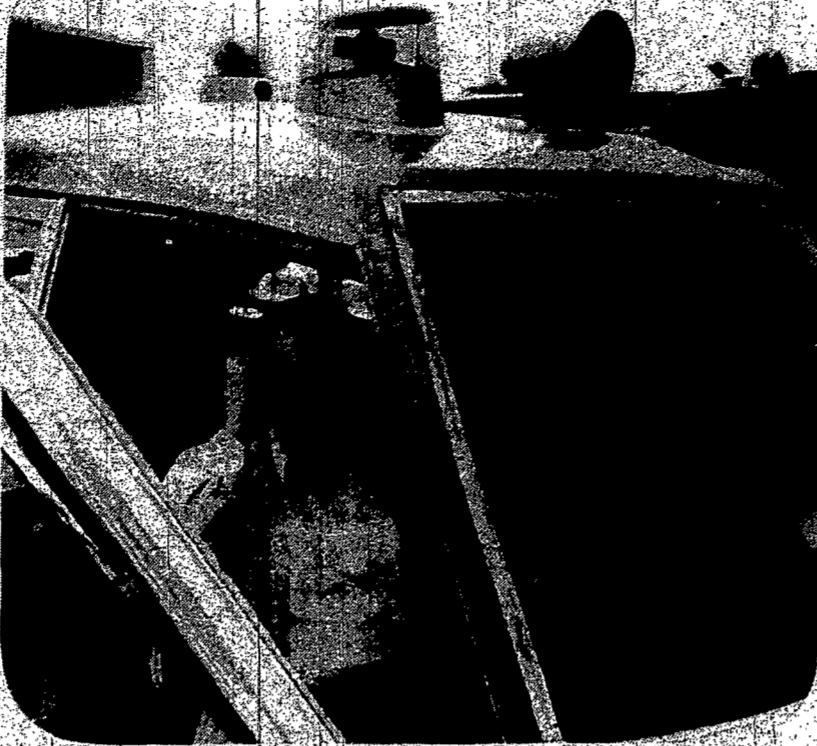


Photo by Dave Witbeck

Reporter Randisi and ambulance attendants.

As the crew loaded him into the rear of the rig, Kuder picked up something from the floor. It was a wallet, from a patient they had transported that morning.

"The man was an intox," he explained. "He was so drunk that he had to finish his beer before he'd let us take him."

The transferee they had now was, Kuder surmised, a jaundice or hepatitis victim.

"Car 43 to Mocoho," he said, and we were off again. Wynne, still holding the I-V, sat in the back with our new passenger.

"The dispatcher has the worst job at National," said Kuder, driving back to headquarters after safe transfer of the patient. "A crew only has to worry about one person at a time, but the dispatcher is worried about everybody at once."

Our dispatcher now was Wesley Taggart, affectionately known by drivers and attendants as "Worm."

"The dispatcher," Kuder said, "is also the most hated person at National, because he gives the orders. But Wes is a good guy, and a good dispatcher."

Wynne then talked about how she got her job. "I had been a secretary at Park Avenue Hospital, and I had gone to nursing school for a while, so I knew a little about it," she said. "And I was tired of being a secretary."

"I was really surprised when I applied that they had no other girls," she continued. "I had no trouble at all getting hired."

"The only thing I want now is my own bathroom. Will you sign my petition?"

(There's a love story here, too. Wynne is engaged to Frank Foss, National's crew chief.)

We talked about whether ambulance workers became hardened to everyday disasters. "Hardened, yes, but not to the point that we don't care," said Wynne.

"You have to have a different sense of humor," said Kuder. "You have to be able to joke about things that a lot of people wouldn't understand. If you don't, the job can get you down."

The dispatcher told us to proceed to Scio Street, where a girl had pains in her chest.

Kuder and Wynne went into the building where the girl lived, a former meat market in one of the city's ghetto districts. They brought her out shortly. She was shivering and crying.

Back to Strong we went, with the patient and her younger

sister, who sat in the front seat with Kuder.

I moved to the back, with Wynne and the patient.

"Breathe through your mouth," Wynne told the girl. "When you breathe too fast, you start to pass out, and that's what's making you sick."

After dropping the girl and her sister off at Strong's emergency room, we again headed back to University Avenue.

"When you're working 24 hours a day," Wynne said, "you can usually catch a few hours of sleep after midnight. If you stay up thinking it's going to be busy, you'll kick yourself."

"You have to be careful when you're out on calls," said Kuder. "Once I slammed the back door of a rig on my finger, and spent an hour in the waiting room myself."

We made it back to base this time, and while Car 43 was getting gasoline, Wynne introduced me to the guys in National's break room.

The room is a zoo. It's like the barracks in the television show M.A.S.H. but, for those who work the 24-hour shift, it's home three-sevenths of the week.

To the dispatch room, and dispatcher Taggart. He explained the color system used to describe hospitals' emergency rooms: A "green" code means clear; "amber" means fairly busy; "blue" means very busy. When possible ambulance drivers avoid hospitals whose emergency situation is "blue."

The phone rang. "What can I do for you?" said Taggart. He pressed a button. "Car 43, we have a heart attack on Culver Road."

I hurried out to the rig. Kuder and Wynne were already there, and I narrowly made it to my first "lights and siren" ride in an ambulance.

"Our rigs have a speed limit of 10 miles over what's posted," Kuder said as we sped toward the victim's address. "We also have to stop for all red lights and check intersections before going through them. It's a company rule."

The heart attack victim was 60 years old, retired, and suffered from asthma and emphysema.

"How do you feel, Joseph?" Wynne asked him as we once again headed for Strong Memorial.

"Stuffy," said the red-faced man.

"Give him three liters of oxygen," said Kuder, who was

busy calming Joseph's wife in the front seat.

Green plastic tubing was inserted in Joseph's nostrils. "Breathe through your nose," instructed Wynne.

"Still stuffy," said Joseph.

I opened a window. He breathed regularly now.

The Strong emergency room again. It's busier at 6:30 than at 5. In the bed next to Joseph's, a young man who had fallen off his motorcycle was being treated. The right side of his face was bloodied. I looked away.

Back in the rig, Kuder decided to deliver the man's wallet he had found. He explained that Ronnie, the "intox," was a "regular" customer, and most of the National workers knew him by name.

At Ronnie's Clifford Avenue address, Kuder went inside and gave him the wallet. Ronnie came out, staggered a little, smiled and waved.

Just pulling into the National parking lot again, we heard, "Car 43, proceed to Cheltenham Road." A little girl had had her foot run over by a lawn tractor.

Cheltenham Road, off Lake Avenue, is far from University, and Kuder had the lights and siren on for a long time before we got there.

He and Wynne ran into the

house and dressed the girl's foot in a splint. Her mother sat by the front steps of the house and sobbed.

Outside were hints of an accident. The girl's shoes were on the lawn across the street. The tractor loomed evilly beside them. Neighbors and relatives milled about.

The ambulance this time made its way to Rochester General, where the emergency room was "blue."

Wynne comforted the girl, four years old, named Amy Jo. Kuder drove, consoled the mother.

"She had some pretty bad lacerations," Kuder said after we delivered Amy Jo. He drew an imaginary line with his index finger along the side of his right foot. "And her ankle was swollen badly."

On the way back to National, I said, "So this is how you earn your money."

"Yeah," they said.

FIRST EUCHARIST

Rexville — First Eucharist will be held at St. Mary's, Rexville, at the 9 a.m. Mass on Sunday, May 12. First Eucharist at St. Joachim's, Canisteo, will be held at the 9:30 a.m. Mass on June 2. A Mass for parents and children at St. Joachim's will be held May 26 at 9:30 a.m. Confessions for parents and children will be at 5 p.m., May 11 and 26.

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