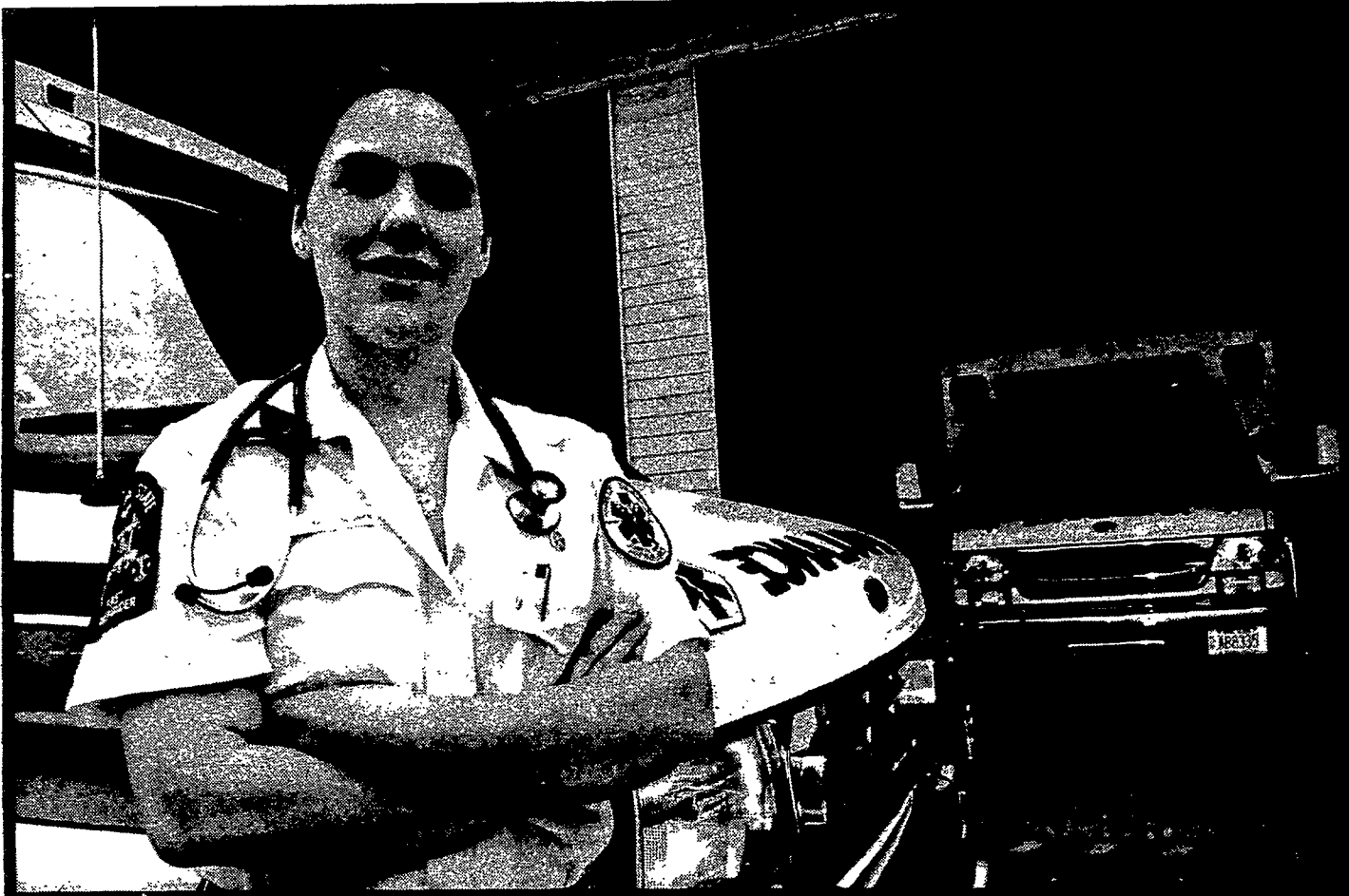


ONE on the ONE

STORY BY MIKE LATONA

PHOTO BY ANDREA DIXON



Katie Noonan is building toward a career in emergency service by volunteering with such organizations as North Seneca Volunteer Ambulance. She is also a fire-department member and will begin college this fall to become a police officer.

"I'd never trade anything for this"

This is the third of a four-part series on diocesan Hands of Christ award recipients. The awards are given to high-school seniors for outstanding service in church, school and/or community.

Katie Noonan, all 5 feet, 5 inches of her, is a young woman training in fields mostly populated by men. She freely admits that people wonder if she's fit to be a firefighter or police officer.

Once she reveals her inner strength, however, the doubts drop off quickly. Take, for instance, the time a fireman challenged her about her willingness to enter a burning building.

"He told me, 'We need people who will go in,'" she recounted.

"I told him, 'Sir I don't mean to be rude, but I'll throw you off the ladder if I think you're going too slow.'"

"He said, 'I don't think you'll have a problem.'"

Some friends, she said, have wondered if she's physically suited for law enforcement: "A lot of people worry about me," she said. But she plans to show them, as well as police-academy instructors, that she belongs: "With the proper training, I shouldn't have a problem. If it takes flipping a 15-year lieutenant over my shoulder, I will."

Saying that "it's always been in my nature to be aggressive," Katie, 18, aims to dedicate her life to community service. This fall she'll enter Keuka College as a criminal justice major, in the hopes of becoming a police officer.

She has also spent considerable hours learning the ropes in other areas of community service. She belongs to the North Seneca Volunteer Ambulance Junior Corps in Seneca Falls, and has also spent time with Finger Lakes Ambulance in Clifton Springs as part of her training to become an emergency medical technician (EMT). She is a certified first responder, assisting paramedics. She recently completed EMT testing and will learn the results in August.

Katie has also assisted with her Red Cross disaster action team. And she's a new member of the Nester Hose Company #1 Fire Department in Geneva, having just been voted in by its board of directors earlier this month. She's currently taking a five-week set of training sessions.

Katie, who graduated from Geneva DeSales High School June 23, describes herself as a typical teenager who hangs out at the mall and enjoys going to the movies.

Though she also works a part-time restaurant job, she often spends even more time volunteering.



"I get paid by the number of people who smile at me," she said.

Yet it can be a challenge to keep people smiling. In early May, she comforted a young boy who had fallen off his bike and severely cut himself. Then, on Memorial Day, she assisted medical personnel after an elderly gentleman collapsed at a parade. He died later that day, marking the first fatality Katie has encountered in her volunteer work. The experience moved her to tears, she said.

"It was a real shock," she said. "Just the fact there was nothing we could do for him, that was very humbling. I definitely thought, 'Why did I get into this?'"

Katie, a eucharistic minister at St. Stephen's Church in Geneva, got through the tragedy by leaning on her faith: "There's a rule in EMS (emergency medical service) you cannot give up on a patient until you pass them off to someone (whose medical training) is equal or higher. I passed a patient off to God."

In all her community work, Katie said she's inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan. "It just keeps coming up in the back of my mind. A man got beat up and the Samaritan could have walked by him, but he didn't. He got him help," Katie said.

Katie said she's aware that as she becomes more experienced in emergency service, she's more likely to encounter dangerous situations.

"There are times I don't want to think about that. It gets depressing, but I would never trade anything for this," Katie said. "If I put my life at risk, then fine. If I have to pull somebody out of a burning building, fine. Father Paul Bonacci (the departing parochial vicar for St. Stephen's and St. Francis de Sales) is also a fireman. He says there's two ways to die — of old age, which is very boring, or doing something you love."

Generally, though, Katie thinks in more positive terms. She said that if she can perhaps save a family pet from a fire, "I've won. Then the family can say, 'Well, at least we didn't lose everything.'"

Katie said she's dreamed of being involved in emergency work for several years, and is more sure than ever that her dreams will become reality.

"I'm going to have a very busy life. I would love to find somebody to get married to who understands all this," she said. "I could never see myself quitting any of this, because I love it too much."

