Memorial service hallows sacrifice: The service honored 16 emergency medical professionals who were killed helping others

By Neil Harvey
The Roanoke Times
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ROANOKE, Va. — The 16 subjects of Saturday's National EMS Memorial Service were people from all around the country:

Sparta, N.C., and Scranton, Pa.; Marble Falls, Texas, and Middletown, Ind.; Aurora, Colo., and Clarksville, Tenn. One was from the Bronx; one from Phoenix; three were from Seattle and five from Albuquerque, N.M.

Despite their diverse locations, they were united by the fact that they were emergency personnel who died in the act of helping others.

The memorial service, now in its 15th year and held at First Baptist Church on Third Street in Roanoke, honored the workers and their sacrifices. Saturday's ceremony brought their number of honorees to 350.

"We're thankful that there are those among us who had the willingness to lay their lives down," said the Rev. Bill Ashford, associate pastor of the church, in his invocation.

A.J. Heightman, editor of the Journal of Emergency Medical Service, presented an emotional keynote speech in which he reflected on new honoree Lt. John Buchner, who was killed on the job in 1981. Buchner was part of the same ambulance team as Heightman's father.

Others spotlighted by the ceremony were equally poignant: Deborah Reeve, a member of the New York City Fire Department EMS who died last year of mesothelioma, a rare form of cancer doctors believe was caused by her exposure to chemicals at Ground Zero on 9/11; five members of a Med Flight Air Ambulance crew, including a husband and wife, who died in aircraft accidents in New Mexico in 2004 and 2007; Eric Hanson, a paramedic whose ambulance was struck by an oncoming truck; and many more.

"They were all taken too early; they all had unfulfilled dreams," Heightman said. "They all had an uncanny sense of humor, because you can't be an EMT without a sense of humor."

In the closing remarks, Chief Mary Beth Michos, of Prince William County Department of Fire & Rescue, urged those in attendance to take their concerns further.

"We have to do more than just come here every year," Michos said. "We have to do a better job in developing a culture of safety."

She spoke of the lack of restraint systems in emergency vehicles and advocated safety training, increased knowledge and especially emergency prevention.

"We should be a business that strives to put itself out of business," she said.

The families of the honorees were presented with a medallion, a white rose and an American flag that had flown over the U.S. Capitol.
Adding to the melancholy of the evening was the possibility that this may be the last year the EMS memorial is held in Roanoke. Though the service will continue regardless, the 2006 folding of Roanoke’s To the Rescue museum has raised the possibility that the event might be relocated next year. Kansas City, Mo., and Denver, among other cities, have already submitted proposals.

The ceremony ended outside the sanctuary, with music on the church steps -- “Amazing Grace” on bagpipes, then taps on trumpet -- and a flyover by Lifeguard 10.

The Mill Mountain Star was prominent on the horizon, and if Saturday’s service does turn out to be the last held in Roanoke, the landmark offered visitors a warm and fitting farewell.