Volunteer Life Saver

His experiences as an EMT have been emotionally challenging, but rewarding

On a Monday morning in January 2009, Patrick Noonan arrived at the scene of a cardiac arrest.

As a volunteer emergency medical technician, it wasn’t the first time Noonan had attempted to save someone’s life, but it was the first time he tried to revive someone he had known since elementary school.

Noonan did his job, giving the patient rescue breaths and setting up a breathing tube, but his classmate died hours before emergency medical services arrived at the scene. He died of a drug overdose.

“It was the first time I felt really weird to be on an emergency medical services call,” Noonan said. “There I am, helping a kid my age, who I knew, trying to save his life.”

Noonan knew he wanted to become involved with EMS in elementary school, when a neighbor showed his Boy Scout troop an Eastchester Volunteer Ambulance Corps demonstration. In high school, Noonan went on to volunteer as an ambulance driver.

“Three years later, I’m still there and actively involved with EMTing,” Noonan said.

National EMT certification levels include first responder, emergency medical technician-basic, intermediate, and paramedic.

Noonan became a certified EMT-Basic in the summer of 2009, and regularly volunteers at the volunteer ambulance corps in his hometown, Eastchester, N.Y.

All certified EMT-B’s are required to complete a state training program and pass practical and cognitive exams, according to the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians.

The cognitive exam tests applicants on ventilation, trauma, cardiology, and EMS protocol and operations. Although he admits the practical skills exam was most challenging, Noonan passed both exams on the first try.

An EMT-B’s job responsibilities include responding to emergency calls and providing care while transporting patients to the nearest medical facility, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. EMT-Bs are licensed to drive ambulances and can prescribe small doses of medications, such as albuterol and epinephrine.

“I think one of the most important qualities is being able to work under pressure,” Noonan said. “I get my work done and I do better. Having that big stress barrier that every EMS job has, for me, it’s like the fuel to get the job done right.”
Noonan responded to 79 medical calls in 2009. On average, EVAC responds to 2,100 calls per year.

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Noonan estimates he has responded to more than 300 calls since he began volunteering, and has witnessed everything from broken bones to stab wounds, strokes, allergic reactions, and gunshot wounds.

Noonan said his experiences are rewarding, but admits there are emotional challenges.

“It’s a very high stress job. Obviously when you see a dead person, when you see something traumatic like a very bad car accident, it can have lasting effects as an EMT,” Noonan said. “It’s always in the back of your mind – you never quite erase that you were there. You were the last person to really see them alive.”

Noonan hopes to be promoted in the future, to a lieutenant, captain or chief. Interestingly, he isn’t studying medicine or health sciences at Quinnipiac. Instead, Noonan is a double major in accounting and computer information systems, but hopes to eventually work on the corporate side of EMS systems.

“I don’t ever want to do this for pay,” he said. “There’s a difference between getting paid as an EMT and volunteering as an EMT, and it’s a lot more valuable when you just volunteer.”

Sean McCarron has lived with Noonan for the past two years, and witnesses the great impact of EVAC on Noonan’s daily life. Noonan frequently speaks in radio code and always sports his EVAC jacket, according to McCarron.

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Since Quinnipiac doesn’t offer an EMS volunteer program, Noonan participates in EVAC every Monday night he is home, usually for a full 24-hour shift.

Although the nearby Echo Hose Ambulance Corps in Shelton, Conn. accepts volunteers, Noonan already juggles a hectic schedule. As a double major with an internship and participation in student activities, including The Big Event and the Quinnipiac University Irish Club, Noonan has little free time.

*Photo credit: Ilya Spektor*

Kevin O’Donnell, a fellow EVAC co-worker and EMT-B, enjoys Noonan’s company during shifts.
“Patrick brings a wonderful attitude and high level of maturity to EVAC when he is on duty,” O’Donnell said. “He may not be the oldest or most experienced member, but he is looked at often for answers, and because of his great personality he is extremely well-liked.”

In two years, Noonan will reach EVAC’s five year volunteer milestone.

“I love EVAC. I call it my second home, like I’m always there and I always try to be there,” he said. “I think it allowed me to develop a lot of skills that I wouldn’t have been able to develop on an everyday basis without EVAC. It’s like my little niche.”