brave hearts

Local Red Cross awards recognize Real Heroes who go above and beyond call of duty

JOURNAL FILE PHOTO

As the Little Bear Fire swept across Lincoln County last summer, the Bonito Volunteer Fire Department fought the raging flames for almost three weeks.

By Donna Olmstead
Journal Staff Writer

Last summer the Little Bear Fire roared ferociously through the Lincoln National Forest and behaved with an uncharacteristic fury, scorching more than 44,000 acres and destroying more than 250 homes, commercial structures and outbuildings, making it the most destructive fire in the state's history.

Lucky for New Mexico, volunteers of the Bonito Volunteer Fire Department fought it with everything they could muster for three long weeks. Despite the devastation, no one was injured and no one died.

Later in the fall, an equally courageous crew of linemen from Public Service Company of New Mexico packed up and traveled east just as Superstorm Sandy hit to restore power for those cut off by the storm.

Both of those teams will be recognized for humanitarian awards as part of the American Red Cross Real Heroes Awards 2013 during a breakfast Tuesday at the University of New Mexico Student Union Ballroom.

ARNOLD: Organized a long-term recovery

The breakfast is a major fundraiser for the Red Cross to ensure it can continue its work to prevent and alleviate human suffering in the face of emergencies. Winners are nominated by those who witness their heroic acts.

Also the Rev. Ryan Arnold of Ruidoso, who helped organize relief efforts after the Little Bear Fire, will be named as a

See **RED** *on* **PAGE E4**

Red Cross Real Heroes breakfast

WHAT: Red Cross Real Heroes Awards 2013: Ordinary Heroes, Extraordinary Courage

WHEN: 7:45 a.m. Tuesday, breakfast and awards

WHERE: University of New Mexico Ballroom at the Student Union Building

HOW MUCH: Tickets are $100 each. Those unable to attend can "Be a Hero for a Hero," by purchasing a seat for a hero at $100. To buy tickets, call 505-265-8514 or visit the Red Cross at 7445 Pan American West Freeway NE between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Smoke billows from the Little Bear Fire in southeastern New Mexico near Ruidoso on June 9, 2012.

Red Cross honors brave hearts

from **PAGE E1**

Real Hero, along with more than a dozen other New Mexicans, who through the course of their everyday lives performed heroic deeds. Read about all the winners online at abqjournalsage.com.

"Our Red Cross Heroes are our neighbors and friends who have risen to perform heroic actions when they are needed," says Pam Catanach, who serves on the selection committee. "They've jumped into action with a selflessness and courage when they see their fellow human beings in trouble. They have performed a wide variety of life-saving actions and remain humble citizens. They don't look for recognition, yet it is important to honor them for their heroism so we promote this type of behavior."

Those who receive a humanitarian award embrace all the Red Cross values, says Rahim Balsara, regional CEO for the American Red Cross in New Mexico. "These are the people who not only go above and beyond the call of duty, but distinguish themselves for supreme heroism, bravery, compassion and courage."

They support the Red Cross mission to prevent and alleviate human suffering in the face of emergencies, to make a difference among community members, while conducting themselves with strong character and integrity.

The Little Bear Fire Heroes

When a lightning strike ignited the Little Bear Fire on June 4, most people expected it would be contained quickly. However savage winds blowing 50 miles an hour from the north and the gusting at the same speed from the south whipped the flames into a catastrophic frenzy.

Tony Davis, a volunteer for the White Mountain Search and Rescue, nominated the Bonito Volunteer Fire Department for their efforts: "The front line of this fire was incredibly dangerous. We could not believe the behavior of this fire."

Experienced firefighters expected that because of the daily flow of wind in and around mountains, the fire would die down around midnight, but this fire burned more fiercely and dropped down the slopes from 10,000 feet to 6,500 feet in a few hours, he says.

"They did their job perfectly," Davis says of the Bonito volunteers. "This was one of the most dangerous and capricious fires, yet in the end, there were no casualties, no injuries."

Bonito Fire Chief Carl Bartley and his wife, Lisa, also a firefighter, were on vacation in Seattle on June 8 when the fire roared full force into his district: "The entire footprint of the fire was in my fire district."

When they hopped in their car to drive the 24 hours back home, their fellow volunteers were fighting a fire that continued to intensify.

Deputy Chief Chuck French says he and his wife, Salvy, also a firefighter, "just started to chase this fire and put resources where we could put them, as we got them. We continued this for 36 hours straight, running for our lives, helping others run for theirs, save what we could with what we had available. I was never so proud and so heartbroken at the same time."

Bartley, who is a banker, says throughout the almost three weeks it took to douse the fire, everyone put their lives on hold and juggled their work schedules until the "last little smoker was put out."

"I knew that each and every one of my firefighters had done everything in their power to stop the raging beast, but with limited access, howling winds and dense overgrown, dead timber stands in the fire's path, they stood little chance. All they could do was protect themselves, our residents and what homes they could get in and out of safely," Bartley adds.

The crew had been seasoned with many historic fires in the area, but Lisa Bartley, an engine boss and leader, says the Bonito crew came together as never before during the fire: "We had firefighters who lost everything they owned and were still doing their part to ... battle the Little Bear Fire."

The Rev. Ryan Arnold

Another hero, who emerged during the Little Bear Fire, the Rev. Ryan Arnold, who the Red Cross will also honor, helped coordinate long-term recovery efforts in the area. Arnold, 29, says he had no experience or education in disaster relief.

"It was a big learning curve; I had to learn on the spot," says Arnold, who came to head the effort through his role as the head of the area's ministerial alliance.

Greg Myers, state secretary of Homeland Security, nominated Arnold and says Arnold's lack of experience was overshadowed by his compassion: "He only knew his community was hurting and he wanted to help in the best way he could and he did."

Together with volunteers, Arnold helped set up a center where survivors of the fire could come for information and register for the generous donations that came pouring into the center. Another volunteer set up a website, littlebearrecovery.org, to connect fire survivors with resources, he says.

Arnold credits his wife, Kristyn, for personal support and all of his neighbors for joining the effort: "We have so many talented, loving, wonderful people in this community that I was able to delegate and know the job was going to get done."

The recovery work continues as residents resume rebuilding efforts after the winter.

Public Service Company of New Mexico Mutual Aid Crew

A convoy of PNM bucket and utility trucks headed out from Albuquerque to help repair downed power lines and restore power when weather forecasters predicted Superstorm Sandy would hit land.

The crew of 41 linemen, the PNM Mutual Assistance Team, started the 5,000-mile round-trip journey, not knowing what they would find or where they would stay.

Operation Manager Steve Dettner, who was on his eighth mutual assistance mission, says New Jersey — where the crew spent much of the 19 days they were gone — was "devastated. The damage was widespread."

Dettner says he loves the work: "I enjoy helping people. It's a really good feeling to get out there where the poles and wires are on the ground and people are really in need and help people get their power restored. It can be tough on the guys, though. When you sign up, you are in it for the duration. You don't know if it's going to be a week or a month. We stay until everyone's lights are back on. We take a lot of pride in that."

Crew members worked seven days a week, 16 hours a day, he says. One crew member helped rescue an older man who had fallen into a hedge.

Dettner said the people appreciated the New Mexico crew and offered them pizza or coffee and doughnuts. Some schoolchildren wrote thank you notes, he says. The 41-member crew restored power to 50,000 homes.

Back in New Mexico, those linemen account for about one-third of the employees in those positions. Other PNM employees stepped up so that no local customers lacked service because of the mutual assistance effort,says PNM spokeswoman Ryan Baca.

When the crew rolled out of Albuquerque, Baca says, "I was struck by the gravity of the situation. Small children said goodbye to their dads. Mothers said goodbye to their sons. But these guys were anxious to get out there and were so full of desire to help. It was awe-inspiring."

See the heroes

After the breakfast, see a full gallery in Our Community, Sage magazine's showcase of people making a difference in our community. Go to abqjournal.com/community.