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Athens police officers and firefighters receive recognition for acting to save a life

Two Athens police officers and seven firefighters who acted to save lives in 2021 received special recognition at Monday's (Dec. 13) Athens City Council meeting.

The Tennessee Valley Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution presented each officer and firefighter with its Life Saving Medal and a certificate of appreciation. The rescues ranged from roadside medical emergencies to workplace emergencies.

"Work days do not always go as planned for our officers and firefighters, and their ability to adapt and respond to save lives should never be taken for granted," Athens Mayor Ronnie Marks said.

Each year the local chapter recognizes individuals in public service who have distinguished themselves in the performance of their duties.

"These individuals on a daily basis serve and protect our community and our society," stated local chapter president Benny Hannah in a letter to the City of Athens.

Upon receiving the nominations from the City, Hannah said, "I really look forward to recognizing these fine public servants this year. We are all proud of them."

Those receiving the Life Saving Medal and certificate were:

Athens Police

Officer Mac McWhorter
Officer William Newton

Athens Fire and Rescue

Capt. Chris Gillman
Driver Martin Ezell
Driver Colton Hill
Firefighter Trey Stinson
Firefighter Brandon Joyce
Driver Hunter Campbell
Driver Coty Collins

Here is a summary of their actions that led to the recognition:

Officer Mac McWhorter and Officer William Newton

On Feb. 26, Athens Police Department and Athens Fire and Rescue responded with Athens-Limestone Ambulance Service to U.S. 31 and Interstate 65 to a call about an unresponsive person. When Officer Mac McWhorter and Officer William Newton arrived, Athens Police Chief Floyd Johnson said they performed CPR until more help came to the scene.

After medical help responded, the officers found out the man and his wife were traveling on the interstate when he started having chest pains and passed out, Johnson said. The husband was flown from the scene, and medical staff said later he was talking when they took off.

Athens is...Classic. Southern. Character.

McWhorter, who is a former Army medic, used his skills again the following day. On Feb. 27, a Prospect, Tenn., man was driving himself to Athens-Limestone Hospital when he flagged down a police officer. The two pulled over at Athens-Limestone Public Library, and the man told the officer he was having a heart attack. Luckily for the man, the officer he flagged down was Mac McWhorter.

Captain Anthony Pressnell said McWhorter utilized his medic skills, and although he did not have to perform CPR, he did call an ambulance, check the man's pulse and monitor his condition until the ambulance arrived.

The man's wife sent a note to the City of Athens Mayor's Office on March 5 because she wanted to send a thank you to the officer, but she did not know his name.

"The officer's quick thinking getting him help saved his life," she wrote. "My husband went straight into surgery when he reached Huntsville Hospital. Thank you so very much."

When told the officer's name and about a similar incident the day before where McWhorter and Newton performed CPR on a man having chest pains, the wife wrote, "We are so grateful. Sounds like there is more than one hero in Athens."

Johnson said the officers' quick action helped save both men's lives.

"Saving two lives in two days is not a common occurrence, but our officers never know what their day will bring," Johnson said. "I'm proud of them for how they responded."

Capt. Chris Gillman, Driver Martin Ezell, Driver Colton Hill, Firefighter Trey Stinson and Firefighter Brandon Joyce

Athens Fire Engine 1 C-Shift saved an unresponsive patient on May 3, 2021.

Upon arrival at an Athens business, the engine crew found a female patient with no pulse. One co-worker was on the phone with 911, and one co-worker was performing CPR when the crew arrived. The crew took over CPR and placed an AED on the patient. After two rounds of CPR, the AED analyzed the patient and advised a shock was needed. The crew did this and checked again but found no pulse. The crew began CPR, and the AED again analyzed the patient and advised a shock was needed. The second shock was administered as Athens EMS arrived, and the patient's pulse was restored. Athens EMS took over patient care and continued life-saving efforts.

Driver Hunter Campbell and Driver Coty Collins

On Aug. 5, a woman broke through a fenced barrier and climbed to the top of a water tank that had undergone maintenance and jumped into 350,000 gallons of water. The hatch closed behind her. Retired police officer Doug Duran saw it happen and called authorities. Athens firefighters Hunter Campbell and Coty Collins climbed the tank and found her swimming inside and convinced her to come to them. They secured her with a harness and got her over the edge. To help keep her calm for her safety and their safety, they talked to her as they walked down the metal ladder. The tank is 70 feet tall.

"The Fire Department must train for any type of emergency not just fires," Athens Fire and Rescue Chief Al Hogan said. "The incidents recognized here demonstrate how the department and its members train and prepare for many incident types. These positive outcomes were possible only through training and maintaining a constant state of readiness to respond to such emergencies."