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# SPARTA LIVING

An exclusive magazine serving the neighborhoods of Sparta and Lake Mohawk



## The Sparta Ambulance Squad *Providing Care, Compassion and Community*

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Cover Photo by Caitlin Courtney Photography

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK GARDEN STATE GROUNDSKEEPING FOR SPONSORING THIS MONTH'S RESIDENT FEATURE.



## The Sparta Ambulance Squad

### *Providing Care, Compassion and Community*

By Teresa Sellinger | Photo by Caitlin Courtney Photography

**Y**ears ago, as I folded laundry in my Sparta home while occasionally glancing out the window to catch a glimpse of the wild birds pecking at seed on my porch, a guttural, blood-curdling scream emanated from upstairs. A loud crash followed, then a series of booming thumps. I raced upstairs to find my boyfriend, Bruce, in the grips of an epileptic seizure.

I knew Bruce suffered from epilepsy. We'd spoken at length about his past seizures. I'd spent hours researching epilepsy and had even watched videos of seizures to prepare myself for the inevitable. But no amount of research can prepare you for the terror that grips you the first time you witness someone you love in the gruesome clutches of a grand mal seizure.

I raced downstairs, grabbed my phone and dialed 911 as I scrambled back up to Bruce. I found him lying on the floor and foaming at the mouth with blood running from his forehead. His arms were folded tightly against his chest, his hands bent in at bizarre angles, his fingers tightly curled like the claws of a dead bird. I burst into tears, forgetting everything I was supposed to be doing and feeling absolutely useless.

Thankfully, the Sparta Ambulance Squad (SAS) arrived within minutes. They quickly and calmly assessed the situation and gently loaded Bruce onto a gurney and into the ambulance while calming and comforting me. During the ride to the emergency room they provided helpful, medically-based advice for handling a future grand mal seizure, information that proved incredibly useful over the years to come.

Mine is just one SAS story. One call answered. In 2021 alone, the SAS answered 1422 such calls. Imagine how many lives they've saved and families they've comforted since their founding by WWII veterans in 1947.

"As members of Sparta Ambulance Squad, we are called upon to respond to a variety of emergencies in our community on what could arguably be the worst day of someone's life," SAS member and former SAS Captain Ashley Darnsteadt states. "I enjoy being able to make a difference by quickly responding to these emergencies, seeking additional resources, and treating and transporting these patients to the most appropriate facility for definitive care. No two calls we respond to are the same, yet there is always a rewarding feeling when helping someone in need."

“Something in which we take great pride is that we don't only take care of the patient—the family is just as important as the patient,” SAS Captain Allyson Wright adds. “Sometimes the situation is more upsetting to them than the patient. For our cadets to see these real-life experiences and learn how to deal with not only the patient but the family as well is incredible.”

As both SAS Captain and someone who grew up with the SAS in her life, Wright is an expert on everything SAS-related.

“At the time I was born, my father was on the squad so some of these people I've known my entire life. The ambulance squad is like a second home to me,” Wright explains. “I followed in my father's footsteps. I knew it was in my blood from day one. Literally, on my 16th birthday—which is when we accept our first cadets—I took my first call with my father. We rode Sundays together for years until eventually he said, ‘I'm done.’”

Wright continued with the SAS, eventually taking on oversight of the cadet program, a program she continues to run to this day. During this time, she became a trustee for six years, then accepted the mantle of first lieutenant last year before being named captain this year, her 27th with the squad.

“When I got married, my husband was a member of the Wantage squad, but I brought

him on with us and now we ride together,” Wright says with a smile. “It's kind of a crazy story, but it's funny because now my dad is the Sparta Township mayor!”

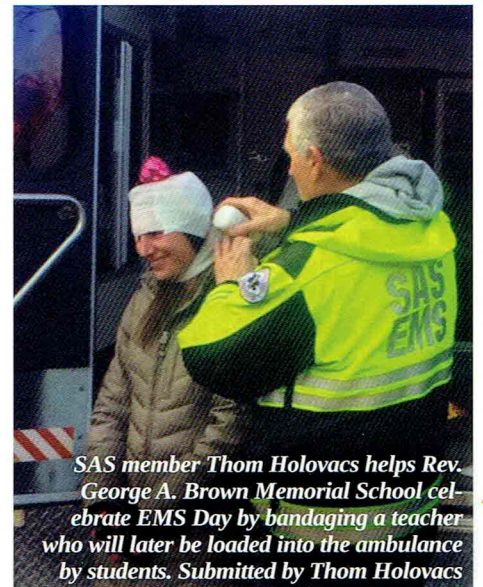
The family tradition appears set to carry on with the Wrights' children, 12-year-old Tyler and nine-year-old Abigail.

“This has been a part of their lives since they were born, so they're very involved and very much a part of what we do.”

Like Wright, a great number of SAS members stay with the squad for many years and even decades. SAS member Lucy Katzen has been on the Thursday night crew for 22 years and member Janice Johnson has been on a “23-year adventure” with the SAS. CEO Brian Bollard has been a first responder since he was 18, now “going on 33 years.” Member Arlene Kayne has been an active member of the squad for 43 years, while member Thom Holovacs clocks in at 52 years of SAS service.

What inspires SAS members to join in the first place?

“I've always been involved in some type of civic engagement and community service,” SAS member Alexandra Castiglia shares. “My mom has been cared for by the SAS several times over the years and, in 2019, when I was looking for something new to continue my civic engagement, my mother became ill



SAS member Thom Holovacs helps Rev. George A. Brown Memorial School celebrate EMS Day by bandaging a teacher who will later be loaded into the ambulance by students. Submitted by Thom Holovacs

and was cared for once again by the SAS. I felt grateful for their care for my mother and wanted to be able to aid the community in that same respectful, holistic manner.”

Like Castiglia, a family emergency also inspired SAS member Miriam Ungar: “Ten years ago, my 35-year-old brother-in-law was driving home to New York from a weekend vacation in Canada with my sister and their four young children. They were on a remote stretch of the New York thruway when my

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SAS members Kelly Stites and Haley Clancy share Halloween spirit at the 2021 Sparta Recreation Truck or Treat. Photo by Ben Wright

brother-in-law suddenly slumped over the steering wheel. The car veered off the road and crashed into the median. Thankfully, no one was hurt in the crash but, unfortunately, my brother-in-law died of cardiac arrest. My sister was not trained in first aid and she relied on dispatch and the help of other motorists to perform CPR. The EMTs that arrived were sensitive, compassionate and went beyond the call of duty taking care of my family on scene and in the hospital. That incident inspired me to become a volunteer EMT.”

SAS member Gavin-Paul Denmead shares, “I’ve always had a calling to service. I love to help people in any way possible, especially in our community. I’ve always been interested in the medical field of the military, and this is certainly the best way I can start that journey.”

SAS member Scott Rixon joined after moving to Sparta from Australia a few years ago: “I was looking for a way to get involved in our local community while helping others at the same time. Once I joined the squad, I found a group of people who sacrifice time out of their own busy lives to help others in need.”

Once they’ve joined the SAS, members remain with the squad for a variety of reasons. SAS member Katie Hannan most enjoys “...the people who are a part of it and all they bring to this organization.” She adds, “I’ve had the pleasure of becoming friends with the most passionate and talented people who love helping this community and are able to do great things for Sparta. They’re so inspiring and make me proud to be a part of the squad and an EMT in general!”

Castiglia enjoys “...the positive atmosphere we create for one another each day,” while Holovacs loves “...helping someone who requires help. The patients say thanks to me, but the fact is that I really like helping.”

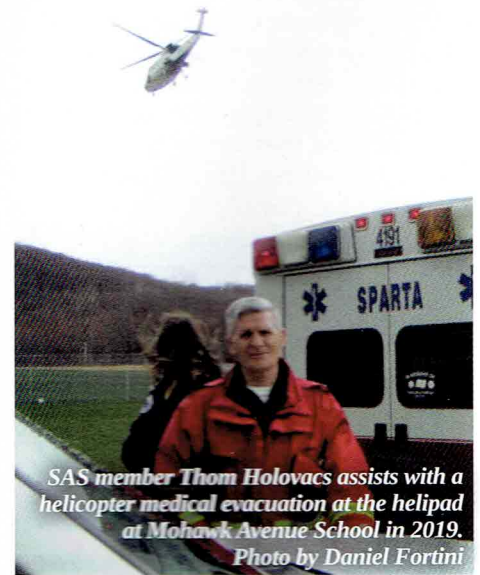
Johnson appreciates how wonderful it feels when she walks into the supermarket “...and someone sees my shirt and asks if I’m a member and when I say, ‘Yes,’ I get a hug and a thank you for taking their family member to the hospital. My heart fills with pride!”

For all of the above reasons and more, the SAS continues to grow, but additional volunteers and paid EMTs are needed to continue serving the Sparta community.

“EMS on a whole is struggling,” Wright explains. “COVID-19 hit all of us incredibly hard. We’re fortunate because we’re probably one of the few volunteer squads in the county that is still surviving the way we have been, although we’re still struggling. We’re definitely not at our capacity, and we would love to welcome new volunteers.”

SAS calls are answered by a combination of volunteers and staffed employees. Volunteers cover the weekday night and weekend shifts. Paid staff members take on weekday daytime shifts to ensure that there is always someone on-call. As soon as a Sparta resident dials 911 for any kind of medical emergency, no matter what it is, the SAS automatically gets called to the scene. Although SAS volunteers spend “a decent amount of time” at the station, the SAS employs a radio system that allows overnight volunteers to stay at home and receive alerts to come to the Sparta Ambulance Building when calls come in.

“Nights and weekends are 100 percent volunteer-covered, so the greatest percentage of the week is handled by volunteers—fellow citizens of the town—people giving their time and their dedication to our community,”



SAS member Thom Holovacs assists with a helicopter medical evacuation at the helipad at Mohawk Avenue School in 2019. Photo by Daniel Fortini



  
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Wright clarifies. "A lot of people think, 'Oh well, they're paid during the day. They're paid all day long and all night and all weekends,' and that's not how it is. There's still a lot of people giving up a great deal of time with their families to take care of the town. They're getting out of bed at night to do this. They're giving up their weekends to do this with no pay."

"We're in great need of volunteers," SAS member Lama Appesh adds. "If anyone has the desire and can make the commitment, we would love the help."

In addition to handling emergency calls, the SAS participates in a host of town events including Sparta Day, town parades, Sparta Recreation's Trunk or Treat, Santa visits and school events.

"We also have groups that visit us in the building," Wright adds. "Girl Scout troops earning merit badges, Boy Scout troops working on first aid badges—we help whenever we're asked."

After nearly 75 years of doing an incredible job serving the Sparta community, what does the future hold for the SAS?

"I'd like to see the high quality of care we provide continuously improved through enhanced training as well as new and innovative medical equipment," Bollard states. "It is my hope that Sparta Ambulance Squad, with the support of the community and governing body of Sparta Township, can continue to provide our essential life-saving service to the community for many years to come."

*The Sparta Ambulance Squad building is located at 14 Sparta Avenue North in Sparta, New Jersey. For more information, visit [www.spartaambulance.org](http://www.spartaambulance.org).*

## MEET THE Sparta Ambulance Squad



Captain Allyson Wright	Ashley Darnsteadt	Mike Lucio
First Lieutenant Miriam Ungar	Thomas Dean	Jesse Marsh
Second Lieutenant Max Merlino	Gavin Denmead	Colleen McChesney
Sergeant Sean Ailara	Sam DiSanti	John McChesney
Chief Executive Officer Brian Bollard	Elizabeth Enriquez	Michael McCormack
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Administrative Coordinator Kelly Stites	Renee Ferguson	Lauren Osborn
Connar Ailara	Danielle Fortini	Eric Philippou
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Erik Aronson	Shannon Furgeson	Scott Rixon
Courtney Askin	Jocelynn Gonzalez	Chrissie Rowe
Maika Batchelor	Alexa Griffin	Elizabeth Russo
Jenna Blandina	Ben Griffin	Jake Ryan
Jason Bush	Katie Groome	Julia Salerno
Margaret Carbery	Katie Hannan	Amanda Sansone
Alexandra Castiglia	Thom Holovac	Tom Schottland
Cliff Cernek	Mary Hookway	Robert Schreiber
Haley Clancy	Jeff Hookway	Tyler Schroers
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