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July 13, 2018 **FRIDAY** 133rd Year, No. 45

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## OUR HATS OFF, BUT FIRST RESPONDERS ALWAYS ON

BY ASHLEIGH FOX

ASHLEIGH.FOX@THESHERIDANPRESS.COM

**T**hey are there for you at your worst moments, on your worst days, in the worst circumstances. They are Sheridan's first responders, and the Sheridan WYO Rodeo has chosen to honor them all this week for their hard work and dedication in keeping the community safe.

First responders live lives full of shift work. Whether working for the Sheridan Police Department on 12-hour shifts, Rocky Mountain Ambulance and Sheridan Fire Rescue Department via 24-hour days or as volunteers keeping radios turned up loud to respond to a call at any given moment, all find themselves never truly turned off from their jobs and are recognizable pieces of the community.

"When we're in town, it's a small community and we really push everybody to be a part of that community so we're recognized very easily," Sheridan Police Department Lt. Travis Koltiska said. "We have to be aware that everybody is always going to recognize us. We can't always blend in and not be seen like some of these larger metropolitan areas."

SPD specifically carries out a take-home policy in which officers park their patrol cars in front of their homes even when off-duty.

"We want that visibility; we want people to know they can come and get us, but it's hard to sometimes wind down," Koltiska said.

Although the visibility causes recurring interactions and extra work, it keeps the work in perspective and helps the first responders from fully becoming numb to trauma.

SFRD interim fire Chief Gary Harnish recalled hearing about firefighters from larger departments becoming completely desensitized to daily traumas experienced on the job.

"I think that would be a tough place to be," Harnish said.

Another benefit to first responders working and living in Sheridan County is easy access to the outdoors. Koltiska, Harnish and RMA co-owner Kari Goodwin all mentioned heading into the service-free mountain to decompress from work and truly get away.

Because at home, first responders remain available if disaster strikes.

"We always know that phone call at 2 or 3 in the morning saying, 'Hey, you need to come in,' is right around the corner," Koltiska said. "It can happen at any minute and it could be something that completely interrupts your life."

Goodwin said even while off duty, remaining in town often leads to a heightened awareness of potential emergencies.



FILE PHOTOS | THE SHERIDAN PRESS

**Sheridan first responders stand at attention as a bagpiper plays "Amazing Grace" during a 9/11 remembrance ceremony Friday, Sept. 11, 2015. The theme for the 2018 Sheridan WYO Rodeo parade is "Hats off to first responders."**

"You're kind of always waiting and watching for something to happen," Goodwin said. "Your brain is wired differently."

Goodwin said the unique wiring of first responders comes from the intensive training and experience.

With that experience comes an understanding of the job and how to cope and adjust to the life into which they opted.

"I remember when I was younger I was excited for not wanting to miss something that might happen during the day and even hoping something would happen," Harnish said. "The more time you spend, especially with the fire and you see the devastation of fires, you start to hope things don't happen."

But the traumatic experiences first responders add to the importance of being aware and prepared.

"As you accumulate your own heirlooms and memories, you stop hoping to actually do what you signed up to do," Harnish said.

First responders rely on each other to get through the rough patches, though. From dispatchers to funeral directors, all responders work together to complete the tasks at hand and keep Sheridan as safe and enjoyable as possible.

"We are a family," Goodwin said.



**A fire engine sits on standby across during a 9/11 remembrance ceremony on Scott Street Monday, Sept. 11, 2017.**

The first responders also expressed appreciation for the supportive community that chose to honor them for rodeo week and

continue to support them every day. Even with traumatic events stuck in their memories, first

responders come to work day after day and tend to the needs of the community 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year.



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144 Grinnell Plaza, Sheridan, WY 82801  
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**Sheridan County's first responders**

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