

Casino security help save motorists

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

On Thursday, May 31, three security officers on their way to work the graveyard shift at Spirit Mountain Casino crossed paths with the rollover crash of a black, 1999 Toyota 4Runner driven by Lincoln City resident Sunnie L. Baumann, 66.

Engine fluids exploded into fire upon impact.

Security officers Dawn Heffner, 40, Jeff Hanes, 45, and Paul Wheeler, 58, risked their lives to bring Baumann, her mother, Lucille A. Pruhsmeier, 92, Baumann's German shepherd and parrot out of the burning SUV alive.

Hanes is an emergency medical responder and Wheeler has 14 years experience as a volunteer firefighter.

Joining the three was good Samaritan Levi Anderson, 22, who lives across the street from where the accident occurred. Also aiding the effort were Sheridan and Willamina firefighters and EMTs, members of the Yamhill County Sheriff's Office and Oregon State Police personnel.

The parrot was not the only one emerging from the accident with a story to tell.

About 9:50 p.m., Baumann's SUV approached the intersection of Red Prairie Road on state Highway 18, the Salmon River Highway, where Heffner sat at the stop sign. The SUV's brakes were locked and the tires were screaming as the vehicle moved down the highway, sliding sideways and then backwards, almost as if it were trying to turn on to Red Prairie.

"I thought she was going to try to make the turn," said Heffner, who recalled the event on June 5 with her co-workers in a conference room on the second floor of Spirit Mountain Casino. Casino Security Manager Brian Willis congratulated all three by presenting them with "Shining Star" awards.

"She is not going to make that turn," Heffner remembers thinking.

Then the SUV started flipping. It rolled twice before coming to a stop at the stop sign on the other side of the highway, and then burst into flames with an explosive sound.

"I drove across 18 and parked by the ditch," Heffner said. "As soon as I got out of my car I started hollering (to the people in the car), but I couldn't get any response."

At the same time, she punched in 911 on her cell. She also was trying to get somebody driving by to stop and help.

"Nobody would stop," she recalled.

Meanwhile, the SUV rocked precariously between the stop sign and the ditch, with the passenger side down and the front of the car facing west on Highway 18 toward the casino, the direction it had come from. Red Prairie Road is nine miles east of the casino.

Baumann later told Wheeler that it had felt like "the steering wheel locked before the car shot to the right." That would be consistent



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Spirit Mountain Casino security officers, from left, Jeff Hanes, Dawn Heffner and Paul Wheeler helped rescue two people from a car that rolled and caught on fire in a single vehicle accident at Highway 18 and Red Prairie Road in Sheridan on Thursday, May 31.



Spirit Mountain Casino security officers Jeff Hanes, Dawn Heffner and Paul Wheeler each received a "Shining Star" certificate and pin from the casino in recognition of their life-saving act.

with a blown front tire," he said.

While waiting for help to arrive, Heffner heard from the occupants of the SUV. She said she was looking for "a screw driver or a wrench or something" to break out the front window, but couldn't find anything. She thought of throwing dirt on the engine fire that was already coming up over the driver's side front tire, but the dirt was filled with weeds. She looked for large rocks, but all she could see were pebbles. She tried to kick out the window, without luck.

When Baumann spoke, her first words were mired in confusion. "Where am I?" she asked. "What happened?"

Heffner reached in on the driver's side window to talk to Baumann and to see how to help her out, but did not have the tools even to release the seatbelt.

About this point, Hanes and Wheeler, who were also heading to work for the graveyard shift, saw the headlights "all weird looking," in Hanes' words.

They hurried down that way.

"It's on fire, Paul," Hanes said to his co-worker and they both jumped out of the car on arrival. Neither saw Heffner, who was working with Baumann when they arrived. She was on the far side, the ditch side, of the car. They all just had the same instincts.

About the same time, Anderson, a 5-foot, 7-inch equipment operator with asthma who weighs in at 270 pounds, and who also has training as a volunteer firefighter, heard the tires squealing. He came running, arriving just after Hanes and Wheeler.

The way the car had landed

forced all of them to work at reaching the occupants from the ditch side, or from in front through the windshield, with the SUV rocking uncontrollably. If it rocked too far, it had only one way to go.

"We started breaking windows," Hanes said. He showed a "rescue knife" designed to cut and hammer through windows and he knocked out the driver's back side window with it. He tried to make it work on the windshield, but "windshields are designed not to shatter," he said, and so it was broken in a million pieces that all stayed together. "I tried to pull the whole thing out but it wouldn't come."

"We could not get the driver's side door open," said Anderson, "but we ended up prying it open as far as we could."

At this point, the fire also was coming into the car from under the dash, not a large, swirling fire, said Wheeler, but "it was coming in pretty good."

Back at the driver's side window, Hanes reached in.

"I told her I was going to cut her seat belt," he said, and used his tool to do that. "She fell back into the car, crying, 'Ahhhh.'"

"I'm telling her (Baumann), 'You've got to use your feet to climb out.'" said Hanes.

"She may have fallen on her mother," who was in the passenger seat, said Wheeler.

"(Pruhsmeier) was calling, 'Help me,'" said Wheeler.

"It crossed my mind for about 10 seconds that the car could explode," said Heffner.

"They teach you in Emergency Medical Responder training to evaluate a scene before going in,"

said Hanes. "Is the scene safe? Do you have protective equipment, gloves to protect against blood? Well I'm thinking, there's nothing safe about this scene and I don't have protective equipment."

Wheeler also knew the rules: If you don't have proper training and equipment, stay away, but he said he was thinking, "If we don't do something, these people are going to die."

"I didn't realize how much that car was still rocking on its side, and I knew it could easily roll over on us, but you're thinking, if we don't do something, they'll all burn to death."

"We got (Baumann) to stand up," said Wheeler. "Jeff was on her right and I was on her left." Anderson was half in the windshield disintegrating in front of her.

"That's when I realized there was a dog in the car," said Wheeler. "I saw the eyes, and I'm thinking, 'Please be friendly.'"

"We lifted (Baumann) up by her pants and out through the driver's side front window," said Wheeler.

They walked her away from the SUV though emergency medical help had not yet arrived, Hanes remembered.

Maybe four minutes in, firefighters, police and medical staff started arriving.

Baumann was crying. "My dog, my bird, my mother..."

Meanwhile, "Everyone's screaming, 'You've got to get out of there,'" said Hanes.

Anderson was back in the front windshield.

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