
PARLAYING HARDSHIP INTO HELPING OTHERS

By Elizabeth Cooper

In 1944, the front lines of World War II came to 13-year old Joseph Magnus' doorsteps. When the Russians pushed their German enemies back to the small Czech town of Roztoky, Magnus and his mother were forced to flee with other villagers to the woods, where they lived in bunkers they dug themselves.

One night, the Germans herded the people into freight cars and locked the doors. But a few old men who had evaded capture slit the guards' throats and freed them. After that the mother and son again hid in the woods, dodging gunfire and scrounging potatoes out of abandoned farmland.

"One night we were running from a German soldier on a horse and I tripped and fell into a puddle," Magnus recalled. "Thank God the horse just jumped right over me and kept going." On another night, a shell exploded five feet from where Magnus was sitting with some other boys, and his leg was deeply gashed.

"I was bleeding terribly, and one of my friends took his shirt and tied it on (the wound), if not for that I might be dead," Magnus said. Later that year, a bullet passed through his arm, narrowly missing the bone. His wounds had to heal themselves, as all doctors had been called to the front.

Those years of fear and hardship forged in Magnus a steely determination not only to survive, but to do right by others in the process.

A New York resident since 1952, Magnus now dedicates almost all his free time to the Middle Village Volunteer Ambulance Corps (MVAC), helping the injured and the sick.

STARTING THE AMBULANCE CORPS

Though Magnus had a full-time job running the computer mainframe for the city's Human Resources Administration, he spent his off hours learning first aid and standing on street corners soliciting donations so the group of 12 MVAC volunteers could buy an ambulance. Within a short time, they had a \$500 vehicle and were ready to roll.

"I got addicted to it," he said. "I found a reward in it."

Magnus said he is particularly affected by situations that involved sick or injured children, because they remind him of his love for his daughter, Tanya, who was born in 1974.

One incident in the early 1980's, in which a 10-year old girl was hit by a truck, particularly affected Magnus. In the retelling, the gruff Czech's eyes well up.

"I got under that truck and saw her with blood all over her face," he said. "She was screaming and crying but that meant she was alive." The MVAC team pulled her out and brought her to the hospital. Seven months later, she came to visit him at the MVAC office. "She said, "Joe this is for you, for your help," he said. "The tears came to my eyes. If you ask would I take those flowers or \$10,000, I would take the flowers and that thank you."

Today, MVAC has 34 volunteers and covers an area that is home to 70,000 people. The corps does not accept any form of payment, even from insurance, Medicare or Medicaid. "That's what volunteer means," said Magnus. As a retiree, he is able to spend much of his day at the corps office on 70th Street in Middle Village, performing administrative tasks. He also trains new recruits and goes out on calls. MVAC fields about five emergencies a week.

SEPTEMBER 11

Magnus and his MVAC volunteers sprung into action on September 11, as soon as they learned of the disaster.

Magnus and the other volunteers rushed to the MVAC office and set out for Manhattan in the corps' two ambulances. The first tower crumbled just as they were entering the Midtown Tunnel.

When the group was a few blocks from Tower 2, they were flagged down by three rescue workers who were suffering from smoke inhalation.

"Suddenly, I heard a sound like a volcano erupting," Magnus said, remembering the moment the second tower began to disintegrate. "I said, 'Guys, run for your lives,' and we grabbed the three guys and put them in the ambulance. Then people started running up and saying 'Help us, help us, take us please.'" Within moments, the MVAC volunteers had packed more than 20 people into the ambulances and headed uptown. They brought them to the triage center set up at Chelsea Piers, turned around and headed back to the scene of the disaster.

Magnus and the other MVAC volunteers immediately set up a clinic in the lobby of an office building and began treating people. And rescue and recovery workers began bringing in the bodies of the dead.

"We all felt very angry and then we were all crying," Magnus said. "It was a horrible experience." Nonetheless, the volunteers stayed for 24 hours straight. They went back to the MVAC office to sleep for five hours and then returned to the scene. "We did that four times," Magnus said.

"But that day I changed my idea about New Yorkers," he explained. "People brought us water, soda, food, hot food. Stores brought truckloads of supplies. Everyone responded."

Magnus says he is glad to help his adopted city and country in any way he can. "This country has been very good to me," he said. "I was always able to find work and feed my family. Also, God gave me a lot, I am very healthy. I want to give something back to others."

