Meet the 2015 Real Heroes Award Winners

Adult Award: Roy Forbes, Cordell Fleming, Randy Harford and Robert Sears
During rush hour traffic last July, a small single engine plane went down in flames directly behind the fleet truck yard of the Costco Business Center located in Kearny Mesa. The plane clipped the top of another store and knocked down a light pole. It spun and finally landed in the parking lot away from the main entrances. Several Costco employees observed the smoke and flames, and acted quickly to try and put out the fire with fire extinguishers they quickly obtained from delivery vehicles, as well as assisted in the rescue of the pilot and passenger of the plane. The team of Roy Forbes, Cordell Fleming, Randy Harford and Robert Sears worked in tandem at the crash site for the first 5-10 minutes before first responders arrived to take over. According to the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, Robert Sears sustained 2nd and 3rd degree burns to his left hand while opening the doors and pulling both victims from the plane. Unfortunately the passenger, who was the pilot’s mother, passed away. The pilot sustained major injuries but did survive.

Animal Welfare Award: Sally Montrucchio
Inspired to save the lives of both dogs and military service members, Sally Montrucchio is the driving force behind Next Step Service Dogs. The organization finds rescue dogs and trains them to be service dogs for wounded warriors with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), all at no-cost to the veteran. Specially tested and screened, the rescue and shelter dogs are young adult dogs, along with a few puppies, that love service dog training, bond quickly with a veteran, and give the veteran a renewed sense of lovability, trust, self-respect, and self-control. Service dogs enable veterans to go to the store for the first time in years, reconnect with friends and family, enjoy moments of play with their children, feel vastly reduced anxiety -- and laugh again. Former military dog trainers and other veterans are being hired by Next Step Service Dogs for full or part-time jobs as dog trainers. This gives veterans a new purpose and career in helping their fellow warriors, thus giving them an additional lease on life.

Community Partner: Residence Inn by Marriott
In May 2013, Residence Inn by Marriott announced a new partnership with the American Red Cross as part of their continued commitment to ensuring employees and community members are prepared for disasters. The council has partnered with the Red Cross in its Prepare San Diego initiative by spearheading a dedicated effort of training all of its associates in disaster preparedness. In 2014, the Local Cultural Council expanded and built upon this foundation and began supporting Red Cross campaigns by delivering preparedness training to all 12 Residence Inn San Diego hotels, with a goal of training 100 percent of the hotel staff (approximately 350 people). Since 2014, over 15 courses have been held and over 250 associates have been trained in disaster preparedness. The training courses teach all associates to make a plan, get a kit and be informed. The Council also has plans to train over 100 associates this year in CPR and AED. The Cultural Council has also started to host blood drives. During a recent blood drive, the Local Cultural Council built and donated 300 comfort kits for the Red Cross to distribute to the victims of disasters.
Fire & Rescue Award: Alex Wallbrett and Benjamin Vernon
San Diego Fire-Rescue Department Firefighter Paramedic Benjamin Vernon and Firefighter Alex Wallbrett have both demonstrated dedication and sacrifice throughout their combined 17 years in the fire department. On June 24, 2015, while tending to a patient during a medical emergency near the trolley, without warning an unprovoked bystander attacked Vernon, stabbing him multiple times. The attacker was subdued by none other than Vernon’s partner, Wallbrett. Without hesitation or regard for his own safety, Wallbrett jumped a metal fence and put himself between Vernon and the attacker, where he too was stabbed multiple times. Vernon suffered life-threatening injuries and Wallbrett’s stab wounds were also serious. Thankfully, both firefighters are expected to make a full recovery. In Real Hero fashion, Wallbrett’s valiant actions demonstrated true heroism when he put his life on the line to protect another. And when Vernon was asked about the future after the incident, he stated, “I can’t wait to get back to work.”

Law Enforcement Award: William “Billy” S. Rodgers
On June 29, 2015, Supervisory Border Patrol Agent William “Billy” Rogers was off-duty and enjoying family time at a neighborhood swimming pool in Imperial Beach. Suddenly his daughters ran up and told him there was a child at the bottom of the pool. He responded immediately, yelling for bystanders to call 911 while he jumped into the swimming pool. Agent Rogers dove down and lifted the two-year-old toddler out of the pool. The small boy was motionless and not breathing; however, Agent Rogers did detect a pulse. He moved quickly and administered back blows and rescue breathing techniques in order to clear the child’s lungs. When the child finally responded and began to vomit water and afterwards and took charge of the toddler. They later reported that if not for the agent’s quick thinking and actions, it was unlikely the toddler would have survived the drowning incident.

Military Award: Randy Vaccaro
Randy Vaccaro is a U.S. Marine Corps combat veteran with three tours of duty to both Iraq and Afghanistan. As a sergeant in Iraq, Randy suffered a traumatic brain injury from several roadside bomb blasts. After leaving the Marine Corps in 2010, Randy lost his way. Suffering from anxiety, nightmares, and depression, Randy was hospitalized seven times and suffered several psychiatric meltdowns before losing his job as a security manager at a Las Vegas casino. Randy ended up living on the streets for six months before he was referred for treatment in San Diego. Randy is now in his 19th month of sobriety, after residential care at Veterans Village of San Diego and the VA Aspire Center. He now volunteers with the Wounded Warrior Project, and has applied for a job as an outreach coordinator. He also volunteers with San Diego’s yearly Stand Down event, which helps homeless veterans in the community. When Randy attended his first Stand Down intervention last year, the only roof over his head was a residential treatment center for substance abuse and combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder. Now, the former mortarman is helping run the event. Randy has turned his troubles into triumphs by helping fellow veterans. He has stated, “Being part of something again, something big for veterans and actually seeing veterans get the help they need, is a life-changer.” For so many that he has helped, Randy embodies the Marine Credo - Semper Fidelis - Always Faithful.
Youth Award: Christopher Simmons
Last year Life Scout Christopher Simmons, then just 17 years old, was on his way home when he observed a vegetation fire spreading quickly towards a housing development in the San Marcos area. Christopher took action and responsibility to put forth efforts to save several homes. While putting out flames with extinguishers and garden hoses, he jumped the fence at one home only to find an injured man with a sprained ankle and flames nearby. Christopher got the man to safety and medical aid, and returned to face the fire. Christopher used only his clothing to guard his face from the smoke and started to experience breathing issues. He ended up in one home to search for a kitchen towel to proceed. Horrified to find that he had left footprints on their carpet, he penned a note to apologize. It read: “My name is Chris Simmons. I am a 17-year-old Boy Scout and senior at Vista High School. I’m sorry about your carpet (footprints).” He also left his phone number and a message to “pay it forward.” Later, the homeowner and found the note. He called Chris to say, “You are absolutely crazy. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, you saved my house. But I hope your mother yells at you.” Working with firefighters and other civilians, he was able to extinguish several spot fires that came dangerously close to several homes. He accounted for using up at least eight extinguishers.

Wendell Cutting Humanitarian Award: Dennis-Michael Broussard
Dennis-Michael Broussard is a long-time humanitarian. For years, he has dedicated his life to performing local and international charity work. Last year, Dennis-Michael ventured to Africa to distribute water filters for people in places with little to no access to clean drinking water. He was able to bring over 50 water filters to Senegal, delivering them to villages, schools and slums. He spent three weeks in Africa at the height of the Ebola crisis and outbreak. Although the news appeared to be getting worse by the day, he wouldn’t be dissuaded from his humanitarian mission. While in Africa, he met with village and church leaders, teaching them how to use water filters and educating them on the diseases unclean drinking water can cause. Dennis-Michael also volunteers here at home. In San Diego, he works with minority communities, particularly in the Asian American community, to develop the next generation of leaders, getting them involved with community and teaching the importance of giving back and being civically engaged. Dennis-Michael created the Asian Cultural Festival and the Filipino Sun Festival. His involvement as a board member, volunteer or committee member include organizations such as: the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition, Africa Aid, the San Diego Asian Film Foundation, the San Diego Chinese Center, the Foundation for Change, the Asian American Journalists Association, the Korean American Coalition, the National Association of Asian American Professionals, among others.

Special Honorees: Scripps Medical Response Team (SMRT)
The Scripps Medical Response Team (SMRT) was the only medical team from a San Diego County health system to be deployed to Nepal in the wake of the devastating earthquake that struck April 25, 2015. While in Nepal, Scripps team members ran temporary medical clinics in remote mountainous communities outside Kathmandu. They did far more than set broken bones and clean wounds. They coordinated the delivery of aid to communities that hadn’t previously received outside assistance. They treated chronic illnesses and post-traumatic symptoms. And they offered compassion, understanding and a
ray of hope to people who were just starting to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives. They were supported from Scripps headquarters by the command and logistics team, led by Chris Van Gorder, Scripps president and CEO, who served as the team’s home-based commander. The areas SMRT served were so remote the only way to access most of the villages was by helicopter. While they were there, on May 12, the second quake struck. It was a frightening experience, but the team was safe and carried on with their work helping the villagers. The Scripps team provided care to about 2,230 patients in 17 isolated villages during the three-week period. SMRT members who deployed to Nepal were mission team leader Tim Collins (corporate vice president, operations and research); Debra McQuillen, RN (assistant vice president, cardiovascular services); Jan Zachry, RN (vice president and chief nursing executive); Patty Skoglund, RN (senior director of disaster/emergency); and Steve Miller, RN (senior director, clinical services). This is a highly trained group, many of whom had deployed previously to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and to Haiti in 2010 after the devastating earthquake there. Each time, the team has returned to San Diego with valuable experiences that are shared across the Scripps health system and the region for better preparation in the event of a disaster here at home.