

# INSPIRE ATLANTA

Extraordinary people and uplifting stories that bring out the best in all of us

## COVER STORY MEDICAL VOLUNTEERS



Daryl Farmer (from left), of the Georgia Department of Public Health, Arnie Zwickel and Mike Mester check a monitor that scans for radioactivity before helping conduct an MRC GEM mock disaster drill in Lawrenceville. PHIL SKINNER

# When disasters strike, neighbors help neighbors

All-volunteer group ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

By Laura Berrios  
For the AJC

Public health and safety personnel spend a lot of time thinking through worst-case scenarios: destructive tornadoes, health care scares, terrorist attacks.

If any of the "what ifs" become reality, there are hundreds of ordinary citizens ready to jump in and lend a hand. These are the unpaid, yet highly trained volunteers with the Medical Reserve Corps.

Last spring, Gwinnett County health officials were faced with a huge task of administering tuberculosis tests to students and staff at a local high school after a student there had tested positive for TB. The Gwinnett, Newton & Rockdale County Health Department needed assistance, so they called on the Medical Reserve Corps-Georgia East Metro, known in the community as MRC GEM. More than 20 corps volunteers spent three days helping test 3,200 people.

MRC GEM Executive Director Sherwin Levinson, who also was a volunteer helper that day, said of his group: "They gave up their personal days, their vacation days. Some of them had to get day-care. It was an awesome undertaking."

MRC GEM is an all-volunteer unit of more than 625 people trained to help during large-scale emergencies. Most members have had no prior medical or emergency experience. They range in age from 18 to 80 with diverse skills and abilities, but share a common desire to serve their community and keep it safe.

"It's a good feeling to know you're taking care of your family and your community," said Arnold Zwickel, a corps member since 2008.

Levinson and his wife, Judee, have been corps volunteers since its beginning in 2005. Both are retired—he was in business, she was an attorney. Their first experience with emergency response was in 1998 after a tornado ripped through their Berkeley Lake neighborhood, leaving them without electricity for a week and no way out of their street. Levinson volunteered to help manage the city's cleanup effort, then became Berkeley Lake's first emergency manager.

From there, he was asked by Gwinnett County health officials to form the nonprofit MRC GEM to help improve emergency preparedness.

"The primary thing we train for is a worst-case scenario," Levinson said. "When something happens, it's too late to gather and start training people."

Members need only submit to a background check and go through some basic online courses. For those who want it, free monthly training is offered on a

## WHAT INSPIRES THEM



MRC GEM Executive Director Sherwin Levinson (right) goes over plans with Medical Director Mary Dunning before the all-volunteer group conducts mock disaster training at the Gwinnett County Health Department in Lawrenceville last month. PHIL SKINNER

■ **Sherwin Levinson:** Keeping the community safe. "I have a child and grandchildren who live in Gwinnett County and I'm concerned for their safety. I'm concerned for my neighbors' safety. This is something that needs doing and I was raised that you give back to the community. Also I've met so many wonderful people doing this. That's rewarding in and of itself."

■ **Judee Levinson:** Learning new skills. "This was not my orientation, I don't come from this kind of background. It's all been new and very rewarding."

■ **Arnold Zwickel:** Getting more people involved with MRC GEM. Zwickel consistently reaches out to his neighbors, giving out information and organizing socials so they can learn more about MRC GEM training and service opportunities. "I don't know why people wouldn't want to learn how to protect themselves and their neighbors. But I enjoy it. I enjoy what I do."

■ **Liza O'Neal:** Supporting and promoting public safety. "I enjoy doing that. I'm very involved with our police and emergency support."

■ **Jarron Okine:** Helping people during a crisis. "I can see myself doing this as a doctor some day."

variety of emergency and health topics, such as anthrax threats, telemedicine, search and rescue, First Aid and radiation—for which the corps has received national recognition.

Levinson said the group is interested in any type of emergency or "helping-their-neighbor" type of training.

"Our mission is basically to help make our community safer, and anything that will help promote community safety is fair game for our training," he said.

Zwickel, a retired grandfather from Lawrenceville, plans the classes based on what members want and what the health department needs. Zwickel says "it's a labor of love."

Liza O'Neal, a former kindergarten teacher from Duluth, joined MRC GEM because she wanted something interesting to do in retirement. She had always been the teacher who bandaged injured students, and her principal urged her to get First Aid certification, which piqued her interest in emergency training.

One of her most satisfying assignments was serving on an emergency team during Super Bowl LIII at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in February. "It was just very interesting being a part of it," O'Neal said. "This makes for an exciting retirement."

Jarron Okine, 26, was a student at Georgia Gwinnett College when he first heard about MRC GEM from an on-campus exhibition. He remained active in the corps even after transferring to Augusta College to finish his degree. Okine plans to attend medical school next year and says MRC GEM is a perfect fit for his future career as a physician.

Okine was in Augusta in 2017 when Hurricane Irma caused widespread damage in South and Central Georgia. As a corps member, he was able to help out in two different shelters in the Augusta area.

"It was an opportunity to put all of my training to use and to help people. Honestly, it was a blessing. It was wonderful to be able to help people," Okine said.

## THE UPLIFT



Sean Connaughty studies his painting of Lake Hiawatha and the surrounding area. DAVID JOLES/MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE/TNS

## Artist uses sculptures to call attention to trash

LAKE HIAWATHA, MINN. — Each Saturday morning, by kayak or on foot, with volunteers or on his own, Sean Connaughty picks up trash in Lake Hiawatha. Some 6,500 pounds of it from the south Minneapolis lake over the last five years. Bottles and plastic barrettes. Styrofoam and syringes.

Connaughty, 53, sorts it, bags it and records its origins. Then, sometimes, he uses it to make art.

In the sculpture garden outside the Minneapolis College of Art and Design stand four billboards that, at first, look like advertisements. But Connaughty is drawing a different kind of attention to mega corporations he's found to be the biggest sources of trash in the lake, recreating their logos with litter. The iconic curves of McDonald's golden arches are, for example, bundles of straws.

Connaughty, an artist and University of Minnesota professor, is drawing on his personal activism on behalf of Hiawatha, the 55-acre lake a few blocks south of his house.

He's an optimist at heart, he said. If people change their behavior, companies change their practices and the city puts a system into place, he said, maybe, just maybe, "the lake will be swimmable again."

— JENNA ROSS, STAR TRIBUNE (MINNEAPOLIS)

## GET INVOLVED

### LifeLine Animal Project

#### History

Since 2002, LifeLine Animal Project has provided lifesaving solutions for animals in county shelters. They are now the largest sheltering organization for homeless animals in Atlanta.

#### Did you know

Every day, 40 to 60 animals enter DeKalb and Fulton county animal shelters, which are both managed by LifeLine. Since the nonprofit took over operations in 2013, adoptions at these shelters have increased by 300%. LifeLine recently opened a new shelter, Community Animal Center, 3180 Presidential Drive, Atlanta. It offers adoptions and low-cost veterinary care.

#### Motto

LifeLine is working "to end the euthanasia of healthy and treatable animals in metro Atlanta's county shelters."

#### How you can help

Adopt or foster a furry friend from one of LifeLine's five shelters. Choose from nearly 1,000 cats and dogs who would love to go home with you. Or, volunteer as a dog walker or pet profile writer or help provide free pet resources at a community outreach event.

#### To learn more

Visit [LifeLineAnimal.org](http://LifeLineAnimal.org) or call 404-292-8800.  
— ANGELA K. WALKER, FOR THE AJC

Each week, we shine a spotlight on a local nonprofit that needs your help to make metro Atlanta a better place to live.

## HELP US INSPIRE ATLANTA

We recognize a big part of our journalistic mission is to shine a spotlight on wrongdoings and to hold our public officials accountable.

But we also understand the importance of celebrating our region's moments, milestones and people. That's exactly what we hope to accomplish with Inspire Atlanta.

Each week, Inspire Atlanta will profile a person that makes metro Atlanta a better place in which to live.

Of course, we can't do this alone: We need your help in

finding extraordinary people and identifying inspiring stories across our region.

**Judee Levinson suggested today's story on the Medical Reserve Corps-Georgia East Metro.** She wanted to recognize the time and talent donated by members of this all-volunteer unit.

Know someone who inspires you or makes metro Atlanta a better place for others?

Email us at [inspireatlanta@ajc.com](mailto:inspireatlanta@ajc.com).