

Trooper's Knack for Job, Fight Against Cancer Win Respect

By Ed Kemmick of the Gazette Staff

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Montana Highway Patrolman Kelly Mantooth describes his fellow trooper Virginia "Ginger" Kinsey as "every employer's dream."

Kinsey's supervisor, Sgt. Shawn Hazelton, calls her "an amazing lady" who can "basically handle anything she comes across."

For a long time, she has had to handle more than speeders, drunken drivers and wrecks on the highway.

Her husband, David, died of cancer in December 1995, and Kinsey underwent her first surgery for cancer almost exactly a year later, on her birthday, Dec. 30, 1996.

Her cancer was in remission for six years, but she has been fighting it again for the past five, enduring a radical mastectomy, chemotherapy and experimental drug treatment.

This afternoon, she will be among a group of state employees to receive a Governor's Award for Excellence in Performance from Gov. Brian Schweitzer.

Kinsey said last week that although she was told of the award weeks ago, she was surprised word of it had gotten out.

"I didn't even tell the people I work with," she said. "There are so many qualified patrolmen that I was embarrassed."

Hazelton, in nominating Kinsey for the award, said that during her long battle with cancer, "she has served the citizens of Montana to the highest level. In 19 years, 10 with cancer, she has not once complained about having to do her job."



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Just a ranch girl

For her own part, Kinsey says she's just a ranch girl - her father was George Raths of Roundup, a former president of the Montana Stockgrowers Association - who learned a strong work ethic as a child and still likes to work hard every day, preferably outside. That's why she decided to join the Montana Highway Patrol 19 years ago.

"It wasn't a great and glorious decision to go out and save the world," she said.

She was 35 when she was sworn in by the Highway Patrol in 1988. She said

she waited until all four of her children were in school before she went back to work, and she was encouraged to apply to the Highway Patrol by a couple of friends who were already troopers. Back then, Highway Patrol prospects worked for a year as dispatchers before going on to the academy.

Patrolling at home

After her year as a dispatcher and then becoming a trooper, Kinsey was assigned to what was officially known as the speed enforcement squad, but informally referred to as the "traveling good squad."

It consisted of a captain and five officers who went around the state to do intensified traffic enforcement in selected areas for a week at a time.

"We did a lot of good work," she said. "A lot of people hated to see us come."

She worked on the squad for a year before being assigned to work out of the Highway Patrol's Billings office.

She continued living at her place between Roundup and Ryegate, but she had to live part time at an apartment in Billings.

She was transferred 12 years ago to the Ryegate duty station, where she has been since.

Kinsey loves patrolling in the area where she grew up. If she needs any kind of help, she knows she can call on just about any rancher in that part of the world. During one "low-speed pursuit" across some rolling hills, Kinsey said, she abandoned her patrol car and had a neighbor give her a ride in his pickup.

Mantooth likes to tell how Kinsey solved a burglary before it was reported. She pulled over a couple of men for speeding, got suspicious about their behavior, made a few inquiries, got permission to check their car and found a trunkload of stolen goods. It turned out they were just returning from the Winnett-Jordan area after breaking into several hunting cabins.

"Ginger has the knack for finding the worst criminals out there," he said.

Mantooth described Kinsey as "a tall, thin ranch-type girl" who is not afraid to work alone.

"I'm not saying she's fearless, but she gets the job done," he said.

Kinsey is also an avid hiker, always ready to go up into the Beartooth, Crazy or Snowy mountains.

"If there weren't so many rattlesnakes where I live, I'd be able to hike

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Support from family

After having endured a radical mastectomy and chemotherapy, Kinsey this year tried an experimental drug that cut the flow of blood to some cancerous tumors.

Unfortunately, the drug raised her blood pressure and she had to quit it. She'll need more chemotherapy as a result, but she has been putting it off, trying to enjoy the warm weather as

long as possible.

She gets a lot of support from her family, which includes four children and two grandchildren, and her colleagues at the Highway Patrol.

"I have worked with some of the most wonderful people in the world, and that has kept me coming to work, too," she said. □

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