



Flathead National Forest

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Media Release

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Flathead National Forest Employee Honored as USDA Unsung Hero *Law Enforcement Officer Saves Young Man's Life*

KALISPELL, MT. – Flathead National Forest Law Enforcement Officer Dianna McKinley received the Organization of Professional Employees of the USDA (OPEDA) annual Unsung Hero Award which was presented Wednesday, May 7, 2014 in Washington DC. Dianna was nominated because of her high level of service to the public and services directly related to the USDA/USFS employee's job duties.

During October, 2013, Officer McKinley was working as an excepted employee during the federal government furlough on the Tally Lake Ranger District. She was patrolling her area of responsibility when she came upon a vehicle parked near the locked gate of the Star Meadows Guard Station, a cabin rental that was also shut down during the furlough. Officer McKinley checked the vehicle license plate and then made contact with a young man (age 24) who was standing next to the guard station. She started a conversation with him, realized he was not in a sound frame of mind and asked him if he was armed. He told her yes and with heightened awareness for her personal safety (working alone in remote western Montana) she carefully and successfully was able to remove a loaded revolver from behind his back.

Officer McKinley inquired about the possible possession of illegal drugs. At first he denied having any drugs but upon realizing Officer McKinley was a K9 Officer (her trusted partner "Sabre" was still in her vehicle) he stated yes, there was marijuana in his truck. When Officer McKinley radioed his driver's license information to dispatch, it came back that he was a missing person and was considered "armed and dangerous." Throughout the whole encounter, Officer McKinley remained calm, assertive, and professional yet compassionate. She kept the young man talking as she detained and transported him to town for a health evaluation.

A couple of days later Officer McKinley met with the young man and his parents when they arrived to take him back to Louisiana. Their conversations helped Dianna get a clearer picture of what transpired: his original plans were to drive from Louisiana to Yellowstone National Park to kill himself. With the park closed due to the furlough, he drove north and kept driving until he was almost out of gas, cash, and hope. When he reached the Star Meadows Guard Station, he was mere minutes away from pulling the trigger when Officer McKinley showed up.

He told his family that talking with Officer McKinley had brought him to his senses and he could tell that she truly cared about him as an individual. Officer McKinley says, "I was just doing my job" but she used a very special skill in dealing with this young man. His family agrees and his grandfather, a retired Forest Service District Ranger in communication with the Regional Forester, stated, "She really did save his life." Officer McKinley's acute perceptions and immediate assessment of the situation helped prevent a tragedy and gave this young man hope and a reason to live. Dianna sums up the experience saying, "Right place, right time, right reason, right results." She believes it must have been a higher power that brought the two of them together that day.

Officer Dianna McKinley, a 34 year veteran of the USDA Forest Service, and her trusty K9 partner Sabre (a 10 year veteran officer of the USFS) are both retiring in May of 2014. Officer Dianna McKinley truly is an unsung hero of the USDA and will be sorely missed.

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