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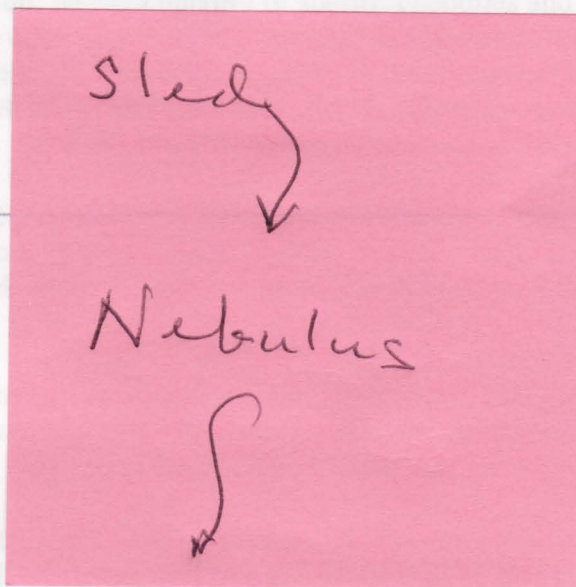
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Blizzard had its local heroes

By Dave Gathman

With Staff Reports

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When northern Illinois' third-biggest-ever snowfall made normally broad, smooth highways impassable even to ambulances and left hundreds of cars stuck in a gridlock of unplowable, wind-driven snowdrifts Tuesday night, heroes often rode snowmobiles. And they weren't always official emergency workers.

Perhaps the most dramatic rescue came after a Hampshire resident suffering from what Hampshire Fire Protection District officials would describe only as a "serious medical issue" called for help at 9:20 p.m. The paramedics checked the patient and set off for Sherman Hospital in Elgin, 12 miles to the east. But the patient, whose name and fate were not revealed because of the federal HIPAA privacy rules, wouldn't get there until 2 a.m., almost five hours later.

"The ambulance had a snowplow along as an escort, but when they got to about the corner of Big Timber Road and Route 72, the snowplow itself got stuck," fire Capt. Trevor Herrmann said.

The ambulance crewmen got on their radio and arranged for a snowmobile owned by the Kane County Forest Preserve District to come to their location, towing a sled. They bundled up the patient in blankets and loaded him or her onto the sled. The snowmobile towed the sled a mile or two to the Gilberts station of the Rutland & Dundee Townships Fire Protection District. There they lifted the person into a four-wheel-drive vehicle the Rutland-Dundee people had secured for the storm and it was able to press on through the snow to the hospital.

Meanwhile, back on Route 47 between Starks Corners and Huntley, 10 members of the Hampshire White Riders Snowmobile Club spent all night comforting and/or rescuing people in about 50 cars and trucks that had become stuck in snowdrifts or ditches. The 10 ordinary folks — age 19 to 40-something who joined the club because they just like playing on motorized sleds — had offered their help to the Kane County Emergency Services and Disaster Agency when they heard a blizzard was coming. At 9:15 p.m., a call came from Geneva, telling coordinator Scott Haseman that a giant mess had developed along 47.

"It was tough," said club member Terry Wellmann, who makes his living as a software engineer. "Some cars had slid into ditches. Some had just been unable to go forward any farther. There were semis. One state snowplow had tried to go around the stalled cars and had slid into a ditch itself."