

The daring rescue on Old Rag Mountain

Arlington searchers add mettle to the effort

By **JEFF BARON**
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Roberta Swicegood was at the end of her rope. "I was hanging at the end of a 200-foot rope on a 250-foot cliff. I was what we call short-rope."

That was Swicegood's position on a cold, wet afternoon at Old Rag Mountain in Shenandoah National Park last week. She wasn't in trouble, though: Swicegood, an Arlington resident, was part of a search crew looking for a hiker who had been missing for two days.

Though the day was dark and getting darker, Swicegood looked 50 feet down and saw some hint that the ground had been disturbed, that something might have fallen there.

"I managed to call one of the ground crews to look at the base of the cliff," Swicegood said. "He was right there."

"He" was Shawn Crawford, an 18-year-old from Baltimore who had hiked to the top of Old Rag with friends on Oct. 8. Crawford had tried to race his friends to the bottom.

When he didn't show up at the parking lot, park rangers started to search for him. When the

search ended two days later, it included about 80 people and a dozen dog teams.

Swicegood said the group was lucky to find Crawford. "The kid was in a gray sweater and gray shorts, and he himself was pretty gray," she said. "It's gray granite up there."

The man who coordinated the rescue operation is another Arlington resident, Keith Conover. While Swicegood was hanging on the side of a cliff in the rain, Conover was at the base camp maintaining radio contact with searchers and directing them on the mountain.

"In our last big search I got to go out and find the person. Now it was my turn to stay back and coordinate the search," he said.

Conover, Swicegood and many of the other searchers are members of the Shenandoah Mountain Rescue Group, part of the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference. As volunteers, they leave their jobs, classes, families and sleep behind to search mountains and caves for missing hikers.

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Keith Conover
Coordinated the search



Roberta Swicegood
"I was short-rope"

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Two Arlington searchers add mettle in rescue effort

RESCUE from A1

Conover, the rescue group's training officer, said the operation on Old Rag is a good example of what the group can do.

Conover first heard about the search about noon last Monday, the day after Shawn Crawford disappeared. The U.S. Park Service and several dog teams had had no luck in finding Crawford, and the Park Service wanted to know what rescue volunteers might be available.

Two hours later another call came asking Conover to mobilize his troops.

The rescue team stressed quality, not quantity. "The way searches are organized today, you don't need large numbers of people to go out in the woods," Conover said. Swicegood, for example, is a 31-year-old expert caver who has been climbing for six years.

The vertical searching she did used caving techniques. Like other Appalachian Search and Rescue vol-

unteers, she also has some medical training.

Conover, 30, specializes in managing searches and directing communications on them. He's a fourth-year medical student at George Washington University, and his medical training can come in handy on a rescue operation. He said he plans to specialize in emergency medicine.

Conover described the rescue team as "people who are competent to go up on top of a mountain in the dark," and they did that Monday night. Tuesday was rainy, foggy and cold. The weather was making the search more difficult and dimming the chances of finding Crawford alive.

The rain grew heavier and the fog thicker. The rescue workers used ropes to search cliffs near the summit of Old Rag. Then, about 4 p.m. Tuesday, Swicegood found herself at the end of her rope, 50 feet above something that looked interesting.

A ground crew was getting ready to leave the area, but she called



Shawn H. Crawford of Baltimore is lifted into a rescue vehicle after he was found on a mountain ledge in Shenandoah National Park

down to it, and two minutes later Shawn Crawford was found, more than 48 hours after he was last seen.

Crawford had a fractured skull, broken ribs, a partially-collapsed lung and a severe case of exposure, but he was alive. Doctors said later he probably could not have survived another night on the mountain.

The rescue team still had 11 hours of work left. Crawford was in a cold and isolated spot high on the mountain. Swicegood spent another half hour hanging 50 feet in the air, acting as the radio link between the ground search team and other rescuers.

Then, while medics administered intravenous fluids and oxygen to Crawford and packed him into a litter, rescuers blazed a trail down the mountain in the driving rain. They needed hours to find a route in the dark, but by 3 a.m. Wednesday, Crawford had been carried down the cliff, along a trail and into a waiting ambulance.

Crawford is slowly recovering from his injuries at the University of Virginia Hospital in Charlottesville.

Hospital spokeswoman Mary Jo Murphy said Crawford is in serious condition and will remain hospitalized for several weeks, but is responding to treatment.

Swicegood is back at her job with Ideamatics Inc., a consulting firm in Washington. After sleeping just 6 1/2 hours in three days she has caught up on her sleep.

Despite the conditions she and other rescuers faced, Swicegood said the work they did was enjoyable as well as worthwhile. "The people are great, the cause is just, and it gives you a chance to use skills you enjoy — and to get off work," she said. She credited her company for its willingness to let her go for rescue missions.

Conover has recovered from the strep throat he got on Mount Rag, and he, too, has caught up on sleep. After napping for only one hour the first night of the search, he said, "It's just like third year of medical school all over again."

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