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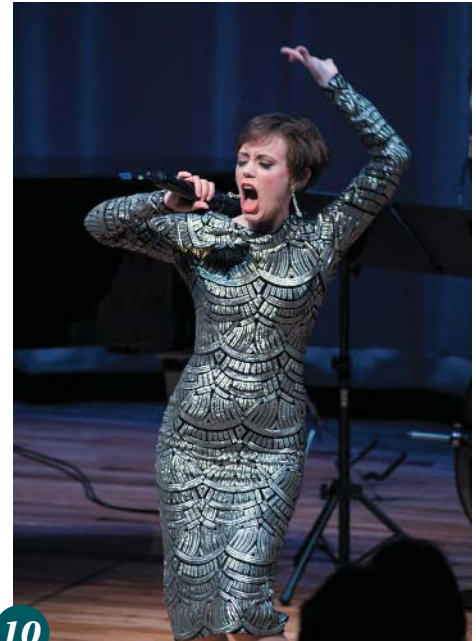
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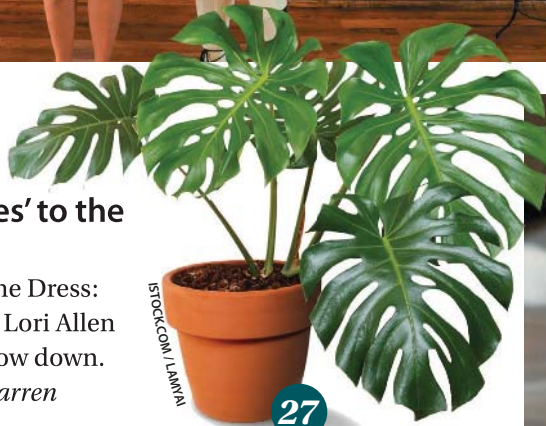


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On the cover

Lori Allen, shown here with her husband of 41 years, Eddie, is the owner of Bridals by Lori in Sandy Springs and co-host of TLC's "Say Yes to the Dress: Atlanta." (Photo by Andy Baxter Photography; background Photoshop by Gayle Hartman.)

Heroes aren't born; they volunteer!



Georgia's Medical Reserve Corps assist in emergency preparedness

By Laura Berrios • All photos courtesy of Medical Reserve Corps Georgia East Metro

The thousands of volunteers with the state's Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) units are some of the unsung heroes of Georgia's COVID-19 pandemic response. This national network of local volunteer groups strengthens public health and improves emergency preparedness in their communities. Georgia has 20 MRC units throughout the state, from Athens to Waycross.

Gwinnett County's Patty Thumann and other corps members are trained to help their communities with large-scale emergencies or pressing health care needs.

"I never thought it would be a health emergency to the level of a pandemic," says Thumann, a business consultant and member of Dacula-based Medical Reserve Corps Georgia East Metro (MRC GEM).

From the coldest days of March through late-summer days with temperatures in the 90s, Thumann and dozens of other MRC GEM volunteers worked side by side with health care employees at a drive-up COVID testing site in Lawrenceville.

A typical day is a mad rush from car to car, gathering documents from anxious clients, going over procedures and answering questions. Thumann, who is bilingual, says her Spanish came in handy and helped to calm the nerves of non-English-speaking clients.

"It was grueling," she says. "When I got home, I immediately took off all my clothes, took a shower and just about passed out. I was exhausted."

The work also is satisfying. Thumann says serving others in times of crisis is one reason she joined the corps.

MRC GEM, mrcgem.com, is an all-volunteer unit of nearly 1,000 members. It serves Georgia's East Metro Health District, which includes Gwinnett, Newton and Rockdale counties.

Most corps members have no medical or emergency career background; they're your average neighbor, ranging in age from 18 to 80—college students, stay-at-home moms, 9-to-5 workers and retirees. They share a common desire to serve their community and keep it safe.

MRC GEM Executive Director Sherwin Levinson and his wife, Judee, have been corps volunteers since 2006. Both are retired; he was a businessman, and she was an attorney. They began serving after a 1998 tornado ripped through their Berkeley Lake neighborhood, leaving them without electricity for a week and unable to drive down their street because of fallen trees. Levinson volunteered to help the city manage the cleanup effort and then became Berkeley Lake's first emergency manager.

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

Above: A team of public health and MRC GEM personnel traveled to Columbus in September 2017 to assist with Hurricane Irma evacuees being housed in a shelter set up in the Columbus Civic Center.



MRC GEM volunteers practice setting up a portable drive-through tent on March 12, 2020. This type of tent could be used for drive-through COVID-19 testing or vaccinations.



MRC GEM volunteers worked with public health officials in setting up and operating a mass vaccination clinic at Meadowcreek High School in Gwinnett County during the H1N1 flu outbreak in 2009.



MRC GEM volunteers learn how to operate population-monitoring stations at community reception centers after a radiological or nuclear incident. The class was taught by personnel from the Department of Energy.



MRC GEM members practice the proper technique to screen for radioactive contamination.

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

An exciting retirement

Liza O’Neal, a former kindergarten teacher from Duluth, joined MRC GEM because she wanted something interesting to do in her 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 Atlanta in 2019. Volunteers helped with air-quality checks and were kept abreast on emergency preparedness throughout Super Bowl week.

“This makes for an exciting retirement,” O’Neal says.

To join the MRC GEM unit, prospective members need only submit to a background check and go through some intro-

ductory online courses. Free monthly training is offered but not mandatory on various emergency and health topics, such as anthrax threats, telemedicine, sheltering for weather events and wilderness and remote first aid, as well as radiation response—for which the unit has received national recognition.

Levinson says the group is interested in emergency or “helping-their-neighbor” types of training. He does much of the teaching himself, and, after almost a year of holding online sessions, Levinson is eager to see his current volunteers and meet new members in person.

Arnold Zwickel, a retired dental lab owner/operator from Lawrenceville, plans the content of the classes based on what members want and what the health department needs. For the last decade, he’s given a lot of his spare time to corps activities.

“It’s a labor of love,” he says.

He consistently reaches out to his neighbors, giving out



MRC GEM Executive Director Sherwin Levinson, center, accepts a resolution passed by the Georgia House of Representatives in 2016 in appreciation of MRC GEM. Also pictured, from left, are state Rep. Timothy Barr, R-Lawrenceville, and state Rep. Buzz Brockway, R-Lawrenceville. Barr is also a member of MRC GEM. At the time, the corps had a membership of 400 who volunteered 3,000 hours a year, producing an estimated economic value of nearly \$75,000 for the Georgia East Metro Health District.

During the pandemic, MRC GEM membership has soared, with more than 300 new sign-ups in 2020. Unit members served more than 2,200 hours last year, with 627 hours logged in March alone.



MRC GEM volunteers learn how to put on and take off personal protective equipment that would be used in the event of radioactive dust.

information and organizing social events so they can learn more about MRC GEM opportunities.

"I don't know why people wouldn't want to learn how to protect themselves and their neighbors," Zwickel says.

Giving back to the community

During the pandemic, MRC GEM membership has soared, with more than 300 new sign-ups in 2020. Unit members served more than 2,200 hours last year, with 627 hours logged in March alone.

More than 100 corps members have helped in some way. Many more wanted to be involved but couldn't because they were at-risk for COVID or had young children to consider, Levinson says.

In addition to COVID testing, members helped with contact tracing. Brittany Carter, former epidemiology manager for the Gwinnett, Newton and Rockdale County Health Department, says these volunteers were "critical" to getting the system up and running.

During the pandemic's early days, with lockdowns in place, five to seven corps members showed up at the health department every day, ready to work. They helped to test the new, text-based contact-tracing system, and their work set the tone for the department's contact tracing unit.

"They were amazing," says Carter, who also is a member of MRC GEM. "They played a critical part, and we wouldn't have been able to do it without them. I felt really proud of the organization that right off the bat people showed up, and their work was exceptional, too."

It is not known whether MRC GEM will assist with coronavirus vaccinations, but volunteers will be ready if called.

The unit trains for mass immunizations, and members quickly responded when asked to help during an H1N1 flu outbreak in April 2009. Volunteers gave thousands of flu shots at a makeshift clinic set up at a Gwinnett County high school.

"I'm convinced that the reason we didn't have a true [flu] pandemic was that we got so many people vaccinated," Levinson said.

In 2019, Gwinnett County health officials had to administer tuberculosis (TB) tests to students and staff members at a local high school after a student tested positive for TB. The health department called on MRC GEM. More than 20 corps members spent three days helping to test 3,200 people.

"They gave up their personal days, their vacation days. Some of them had to get day care. It was an awesome undertaking," Levinson says.

Levinson stays involved with the corps unit because he wants to keep the community safe and is concerned about his family and neighbors.

"This is something that needs doing, and I was raised [to believe] that you give back to the community. Also, I've met so many wonderful people doing this. That's rewarding in and of itself," he says. "More members and supporters are always needed and welcomed." 🍷

Laura Berrios is a freelance writer based in Alpharetta.

For more information

The Georgia Medical Reserve Corps program, housed under the Georgia Department of Public Health, is part of a national network of almost 200,000 volunteers serving in about 800 units throughout the country. To find out more about Georgia's MRC units, visit mrc.hhs.gov/findmrc.