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WILDERNESS EMS



PHOTO COURTESY OF CWEMSE

2012 extern Daniel Willner will be moving to Burke County in September to complete his wilderness emergency field training as part of the Carolina Wilderness EMS Externship program.

INTO THE WILD

New program makes most of Burke landscape

BY J. REYNOLDS HUTCHINS
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MORGANTON — The rugged and inspiring wilderness of Burke County has been an organic classroom to locals and visitors since the first settlers came to the foothills of western North Carolina. This September, with years of experience behind the project, the frontier of the Appalachians will welcome yet

another set of scholars to its bosom for the first official year of the Carolina Wilderness EMS Externship.

CWEMSE has been heralded as one of the most ambitious wilderness EMS electives in the nation for its innovative attention to field response training in a field that is often overly confined to classrooms and hospital room education.

The program is a unique venture between Burke County Emergency

Services, Blue Ridge HealthCare, Western Piedmont Community College and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Department of Emergency Medicine.

New externs, Daniel Willner of UNC Chapel Hill and Justin Sempstrott of the University of Nevada — Las Vegas, will live in Burke County for a month studying wilderness

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emergency response in the field from the waters of Lake James to the slopes of the Linville Gorge.

Course Director Dr. Seth Hawkins has more than 16 years of experience in EMS and wilderness medicine. He serves as an adjunct assistant professor at UNC Chapel Hill, medical director for Burke County EMS and EMS coordinator for Blue Ridge HealthCare.

Hawkins believes his program differs from other courses offered through EMS or wildlife medicine because of CWEMSE's focus on integrating the two subject matters in a previously unprecedented manner.

"There are other medical school and residency rotations in wilderness medicine and EMS as discrete subjects," Hawkins says. "There are a number of EMS training programs for physicians, as well as wilderness medicine programs, but few combine these two disciplines."

According to Hawkins, externs in the program learn to systematically respond to and manage wilderness emergencies, rather than general environment medicine or individual patient care.

Although the first official year of the program will not begin until Aug. 31, CWEMSE completed a pilot version of the course in June of 2011. Ben Abo, currently with Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami, was the first medical student to participate in the innovative pilot course.

Abo wrote to the American College of Emergency Physicians in the weeks following his training.

"This month has proven



PHOTO COURTESY OF CWEMSE

Ben Abo, currently of Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami, was the first medical student to participate in the CWEMSE program in Burke County during its pilot year in 2011.

to be one of, if not the most defining times in my medical career," Abo said in 2011. "In less than two weeks, I have been able to serve as medical command for an extended remote area rescue while at the patient's side under the truck, a member of a search and rescue operational team with one of the Special Ops medics, medical command for a cardiac arrest in a deep gorge, medical command & family counsel for a tragic waterfall accident, and even more."

Hawkins says Abo's externship in 2011 proved to be a high-flying success, displaying the viability and feasibility of the program.

A year later, CWEMSE has been endorsed by the National Association of EMS Physicians and the Wilderness Medical Society and was named one

of the Top 10 EMS Innovations of 2011 by the Journal of EMS.

Hawkins is proud of the direction his program has taken.

"Our graduates leave with a wealth of practical experience in addition to just theoretical knowledge," Hawkins says as he prepares for 2012's newest externs while also working nights at Grace Hospital's emergency room.

Hawkins and CWEMSE staff will be honoring their newest externs Sept. 5 at the Foothills Higher Education Center from 4-5 p.m. The event, known as the Investiture, will formally welcome the newest externs to Burke County.

Those interested in learning more about the Carolina Wilderness EMS Externship are encouraged to visit their site at www.blueridgehealth.org/wildems/.