

Ready for the worst in the wild

Rocky Vista University students travel to train for emergencies



Trainees in the Rocky Vista University Rural and Wilderness Medicine Honors track evacuate a volunteer "victim" during training exercises in Baggs, Wyoming, in June. RVU students prepared for situations when medical facilities are not readily available.

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Tom Skelley

Any elementary school teacher who has taken students outside for class will tell you it can be a disaster. For Rocky Vista University students who recently crossed Colorado's northern border for field training, disaster was the whole point.

Over the first weekend of June, 10 first-year students from Rocky Vista University's Rural and Wilderness Medicine Honors Track went to Baggs, Wyoming, to practice responding to medical emergencies in areas where hospitals and ambulances aren't readily available.

“I had no idea what I was getting myself into,” student Alisha Cluff said in an email. “I learned so much from this experience... I don't think there is really another way to learn this other than going out and experiencing what the EMS teams go through.”

They practiced realistic scenarios such as an explosion at an oil and gas facility, rodeo injuries, campground fires, childbirths and four-wheeler accidents. The scenes were designed to be as realistic as possible, including “patients” mimicking injuries and symptoms like disorientation.

Other elements used to create an authentic experience included real rodeo animals, distracting bystanders and a “cut suit,” a fleshy body covering that simulates the look, feel and even the smell of performing surgery on a patient.

Cluff said the experience gave her a taste of what it's like to practice medicine in the field, away from the sterilized, controlled setting of a hospital, and it gave her a new appreciation of what first responders go through every time they go on a call.

“They have a lot going on, with sometimes a lot of chaos going on from others at the scene,” Cluff said. “They might not know what they are walking into, and that can be really difficult. I don't think there is really another way to learn this other than going out and experiencing what the EMS teams go through.”

Other skills students practiced were prioritizing and triaging patients, working in dangerous environments and dealing with distractions during a response. A group of emergency medical technicians from nearby Little Snake River EMS team joined in the exercises, sharing their firsthand experiences with Rocky Vista students while honing their own skills.

Cluff said the convincing scenarios could be overwhelming at times, but she added it was helpful to practice the skills in a situation where lives weren't actually on the line.

“There are times when you have no idea what to do, what is going on, or even how to help, but you learn from trying,” Cluff said. “It (was) well worth the time spent to gain hands-on experience.”