

LIFESTYLES

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Local Firefighter Driving for National Pink Heals Tour

Rhyne Is 'Man Enough to Wear Pink' ...And Cry

By CAREY HEAD
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John Rhyne is having the time of his life helping cancer patients celebrate theirs.

The retired Ponca City fireman embarked Sept. 9 to join the "Pink Heals Tour" and its brigade of pink fire trucks driven by volunteer firemen in pink bunker gear. He joined the tour at Plattsburgh, N.Y. and has lived a whirlwind of smiles, tears, hugs and handshakes from the thousands of people that turn out to greet them in each town they cross.

The Pink Heals Tour is an inspiration and creation of Dave Graybill, former professional athlete and recently retired Arizona fireman. In a firetruck painted pink and wearing pink bunker, or turnout, gear, Graybill began driving across the United States to "carry the signatures of very special people, mostly women, some men, and a few children" in a message to all who have not fought this cancer battle yet. Their message? Troops are rallied, we stand beside you, care enough to wear pink to honor you, and protect and stand up to anything that might harm our women and children at all costs.

As Graybill explains, "We're making a statement of true love and hope by coming together as a unified front, wearing her color with pride and letting the world know that we stand ready for war against this disease we call cancer."

Since Rhyne joined the tour Sept. 9, the pink fire trucks and their volunteer drivers have taken this message to Montreal, Canada, and then down through the Eastern Seaboard. They've wound their way through Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia in less than 20 days. Almost always, the fire trucks are greeted by a host of local, county and state emergency vehicles to escort them to the tour's next stop.

Rhyne, Ponca City Fire Department's Emergency Medical Services division chief, retired in June 2010. He approached Graybill about this time last year when the Pink Heals Tour answered Cathy Cole's invitation to make a stop in Ponca City at the Pioneer Woman Museum. (Cole persuaded Graybill to add Ponca City to his already exhaustive tour schedule on behalf of Healthy Woman Program and Soroptimist International. The two groups teamed up to raise breast cancer awareness and host the annual breast cancer banquet.)

Rhyne and Graybill hit it off — not surprising given the heart-on-sleeve nature of both of these big guys — and Graybill invited Rhyne to apply for a spot as a driver for a leg of the 2011 tour. Rhyne said he wanted to sign up because he's had several members of his family who have had cancer.

Also important?
"I love driving," Rhyne laughs. "I'm a Shriner and I drive the Shriner van to transport kids and their parents to the Shriner hospitals in Galveston (Texas) or Shreveport (Louisiana). I also transport to St. Louis and Chicago. They are transported for free and given accommodations for however long is needed, and, the Shriners hospitals treat for free almost anything that goes wrong with a kid."

So, as a Shriner, does he enjoy parade duty driving those crazy little cars in parades? Nope. He'd rather be close to kids — and their parents.

"I love dressing up and walking parade routes interacting with the kids, passing out candy, messing with their parents," he grins. "And helping raise funds for the Shriners Hospital and promoting Shriners."

MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN?

His love of driving, matched by a genuine affection for people in general, makes him a perfect candidate for a Pink Heals Tour volunteer fire truck driver. We first began talking about the journey a few days before he left. Since then,

Rhyne and I have visited almost daily as he shares stories and images from the tour stops.

"All of us are either active or retired firefighters," he said. "I got to be one of two people to take the truck to Montreal because I could find my passport. It was so beautiful and clean, no junk cars, no junk on the porch — like going back 50 years in time. Members of the first Pink Heals chapter in Canada met us at the border with their pink fire truck and they were joined by all kinds of emergency responders that escorted us to town. Up here there are women sheriffs, women firefighters, police officers, (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) Mounties, and they are all the nicest people. Of course, they talk funny and make fun of the way I talk..."

In Putney, Vermont ("beautiful, beautiful country," Rhyne kept repeating), the group assisted the town with its efforts to start a Pink Heals Tour chapter. During his description of the day, the crowd, support and shared laughter, Rhyne's voice quiets as he said, "A 13-year-old girl signed the top of one of our fire trucks. She'd had a double mastectomy. [Her visit] happened today and we all cried."

He also shared, "something happened Saturday (Sept. 10) that was a first for me," he said. "We got to the parade place and we drove all through the neighborhoods with sirens on. People came out in P.J.s, a guy in boxers, I've never been in a parade where we took the parade to the people."

Everywhere the pink fire trucks are spotted creates a wave of hands, a cacophony of horns, even police sirens flipped in greeting. "Everyone is so nice," he continuously adds.

BARELY A MOMENT TO SPARE

His days are packed with travel, greeting the public, selling T-shirts to pay for fuel, with little down time or sleep.

"Soon as you get through with one city, we pack up, clean up, drive all night if we need to in order to get to the next stop, and then meet the public."

Rhyne has a personalized duffel bag and T-shirts provided by Graybill. The pink turnout gear is also provided and the firemen take turns wearing it because it has been so hot.

"We stop at hotels with washing machines to try and catch up on laundry but we're responsible for our own stuff."

The grueling schedule is having little impact on Rhyne's easygoing nature or his respect for victims and families of cancer. "We try to escort each person to sign the trucks — and each truck is named after women who have been inspirational. For those with a family member with cancer, we especially encourage them to sign the trucks. Dave's goal is to have every city with a back-up fire truck to paint it pink. Right now Ponca City doesn't have a back-up fire truck."

After a couple of weeks winding down the highways and byways of the eastern U.S., Rhyne is now in Daytona Beach, Fla., where he admitted his part in the tour has been extended.

"Dave told me only one other guy besides me has asked to stay longer. Everywhere we go we meet people, deliver flowers, visit hospitals. In Rhode Island, we went by a little girl's house, she was seven, who was diagnosed with cancer in December. She was so weak she could hardly move. We also visited two girls, 8 and 9, who have been diagnosed with cancer since December. All are bald from treatment. The mom of the 7-year-old was so touched, she came to the next day's event to thank us and tell us what it meant to her daughter."

Rhyne calls me when he gets a small break in the action in order to fill me in on the past several days' activities. In our conversations, despite glitchy cell phone signals, happy people noises in the background, and John constantly being interrupted to call a greeting or a "thank you" to a visitor, one clear message always come through: This man has a new passion and respect for the resilience of people with cancer and their families.



JOHN RHYNE, former Emergency Medical Services division chief and Ponca City fireman, retired in June 2010. This month he climbed back in the cab; but this time, the fire truck is pink and driving across the United States. (News Photo by Carey Head)



DURING A "Twister" watch party hosted by a Vermont family during the Pink Heals tour, John Rhyne was asked to stand beside the television screen when his character appears. Twister, starring Helen Hunt and Bill Paxton, was released in 1996. The 1995 filming of the movie took place primarily in Kay, Osage and Grant counties. Rhyne portrayed an EMT assisting the character Meg Greene, played by Lois Smith, after Greene's home in Wakita was destroyed.

"I didn't sign up because it looked like fun," he said, "but because I wanted to help draw attention to cancer victims and survivors and help raise money. They only let firemen or women do this. I have to help."

When he finally turns home, what will be waiting?
His bed. "I want to sleep for a week."
And his wife, Mary. "She wants me to paint the house; I try to keep her happy. I also want her to see how beautiful the Northeast is so I'd like to take her on vacation once I get back."
"But we'll probably fly."



MOTORCYCLE GANGS, cancer patients and thankful families turned out in force to greet the Pink Heals tour in Providence, R.I. John Rhyne, local retired firefighter, is a driver on the tour and shared his photographs from the road.



CATCHING THE "Pink Heals" spirit is John Rhyne, left, with a pink ribbon painted on his head. He is shown greeting an unidentified spectator at a Rhode Island stop on the Pink Heals national tour.

Excitement Builds for Pink Heals Local Visit

Ponca City will be an extended stop on the national Pink Heals Tour. According to Cathy Cole, local Pink Heals Tour coordinator, four pink fire trucks and a crew of eight firefighters are due to arrive in Ponca City the evening of Oct. 26 with their two days of public appearances Thursday, Oct. 27 and Friday, Oct. 28.

Cole is especially excited about the extended stay — unique for a the busy tour that tries to make stops in at least one town each day. She knows from last year's event the impact the site of the pink firetrucks and pink-gearred firefighters have on those touched by cancer.

Cole recently shared a message left on her voice mail from a thankful spectator at last year's Pink Heals Tour event at the Pioneer Woman Museum. Ladonna Reed agreed to share her words with The Ponca City News.

"Hi, this is Ladonna Reed and I hope you are the right person that I need to talk to that brought in the Pink Heals.

Words cannot begin to express how that felt and what it meant. I'm a breast cancer survivor of a year and two months.

I've had a double mastectomy and also lost my mother to breast cancer and I have two aunts that have it.

Thank you, thank you, thank you are not big enough words for you and the Healthy Woman Program.

You will always be in my prayers for all you and the program do for all of us. Thank you." Pink Heals Tour creator and chief is Dave Graybill. He will be the featured speaker at the Breast Cancer Awareness Banquet. The event is sponsored by Ponca City Medical Center's Healthy Woman Program and Soroptimist International of Ponca City. It will begin at 6:30 p.m., Oct. 27 at Northeast Baptist Church. Tickets are \$15 each and can be reserved by calling 765-0529 or via e-mail, cathy_cole@chs.net.

While here, the public is encouraged to meet the firefighters during their appearance at the Marland Mansion. The tour also will visit Ponca City High School to honor students whose families are touched by cancer. Home delivery of flowers to those fighting cancer as well as a visit to Ponca City Medical Center are planned. A complete schedule of events will be available soon.

In advance of the tour stop, Healthy Woman Program is selling T-shirts for \$15 each. T-shirts are available at the Healthy Woman conference center in the Specialty Services building on the hospital campus. Proceeds will pay for mammograms for area women unable to afford them. Everyone is encouraged to wear the T-shirts during the Pink Heals Tour stop and help "Paint Ponca Pink."

Come Hungry



GETTING READY for the Fall Salad Luncheon and Bake Sale at Albright United Methodist Church are, from left, Lynnita Miller, Katie Goss, Kathy Caldron, Paula Coppock and Donna Evans. The annual event will be held from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Friday, Oct. 7 at the church located at 128 South Palm. Tickets are \$6 for adults and \$2 for children and may be purchased at the door. The menu includes hot chicken salad with an assortment of other delicious salads to choose from. Also available for purchase will be a large assortment of bake goods and the cookbook "Homemade with Love." The public is invited to attend. Sponsored by Albright United Methodist Women, proceeds benefit mission projects.