

‘He could be the difference between life and death. It’s something he has to do.’

## A good man on a wicked road

**T**HIS is the story of Dr. Bill, who has an ordinary practice in San Jose and an extraordinary one on the summit of Highway 17 in the Santa Cruz mountains.

When I heard it, I didn’t believe it. I still don’t understand it, but I’m not the only one.

Dr. Bill’s wife can’t explain why, in six years, he has voluntarily rushed to the scene of 500 automobile accidents in his 1979 Porsche to help victims of the snake-like roller coaster road.

Neither can the heads of the fire and forestry departments that serve that area, nor the officers of the California Highway Patrol.

Not even Dr. Bill knows what drives him. I asked him a half-dozen different ways and each time he stared into space, unable to produce a convincing answer. He’s never given it much thought, he said. Here’s the story:

Dr. Bill is 48, with blue-gray eyes and thick brown hair that gives way to gray



Steve Lopez

wisps on the fringe. He works a full day as a surgeon and puts in extra time on medical disaster planning for the county and state.

Then he heads home to his wife, two children and four fire and police radio scanners. They live near the summit of Highway 17 and, on a clear day, have a far-off but splendid view of Monterey Bay.

When he’s home, the radio scanners are on, buzzing with chatter from police and fire dispatchers. During dinner, during conversation, during sleep, during everything.

“My wife hates it,” Dr. Bill says.

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# Preventive medicine: brake early or you may need Dr. Bill

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When he hears a report of an accident on 17, he's into the Porsche in a flash. Frequently, he's one of the first people on the scene. He also responds to fires or medical emergencies at homes in the area.

"It started six years ago. I was on my way to work one morning and there was an accident under the bridge at the summit," Dr. Bill says.

A woman had bounced her sports car off the walls and bashed her head. Only a police officer, Rich Grogan of the CHP, was there. So Dr. Bill stopped and treated the woman.

"Grogan said he could use some help up there. He said, 'Could I call you on a CB when we have a problem?'"

Grogan explains that sometimes it takes 30 minutes for an ambulance to wind its way up to the scene of an accident.

Dr. Bill responded to 30 calls the first year. The number picked up dramatically the next year, when he got the police scanners and began responding on his own.

**G**RADUALLY, with the piecemeal addition of medical supplies, his Porsche became an ambulance. He crammed emergency medical equipment under the back seat and in the trunk. He once did a tracheotomy on the roadside and has performed other major patchwork.

"He can do surgery out of the back of his car," says Doug Sporleder, Chief of the Central Fire Protection District.

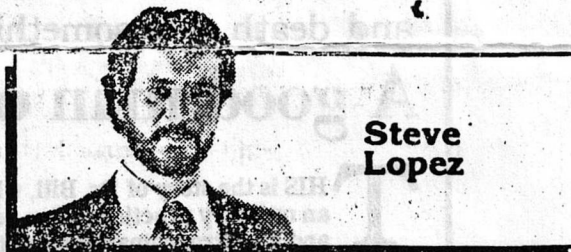
"It's amazing. Basically, he's a rolling MASH unit."

The CHP gives him road flares, hospitals on both sides of the mountain donate medical supplies, and fire departments keep him supplied with oxygen tanks.

Dr. Bill seldom accompanies the injured to the hospital. He just cares for them until an ambulance arrives. Two weeks ago, he pronounced two people dead along the roadside after a fiery crash that ended a race down the mountain.

He logs his runs and counts approximately 500 so far, involving about 300 injuries. One steamy Saturday, when Highway 17 was a bumper-to-bumper parking lot pointed at the beach, there were 17 accidents. Dr. Bill went to the six that involved injuries.

One night on the way home from work, he saw a van teetering on the edge of an embankment. He stopped and peered in to see "a couple locked in



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Department of Forestry in Felton:

"I think he likes the excitement of the actual emergency scene. More than the excitement, the challenge."

Lt. Loren Marburg, San Jose CHP:

"I've been in the business for 19 years and I've seen doctors stop when they come across an accident, but never one who purposely listens for them. I just don't know why he does it. But we sure appreciate it."

Chief Sporleder:

"Maybe he's a frustrated firefighter. We get that same rush. The bell goes off, the surge starts, the adventure begins."

Dr. Bill:

"It's in the nature of a hobby."

But I don't write stories in my spare time. I tell him.

"Well, I don't know. We all don't know what makes us tick, do we?"

I think we have a good hunch.

"I do get a sense of community from it. We're somewhat isolated and independent up there on the mountain. I feel like if I wanted help from anybody up there, I could get it."

Helping the CHP and firefighters also enhances his credentials as a medical disaster planner, he says.

He also believes a small number of doctors impugn the medical profession by doing unethical things, such as overcharging patients. He likes to think that his no-charge services help compensate for that. Every Christmas, he says, he gets cards and letters from the growing ranks of Highway 17's wounded warriors.

**T**HAT'S part of the reason Dr. Bill does what he does. Maybe the rest of it is more basic than he or I think.

He's just a good person.

Dr. Bill says, by the way, that most of the accidents on the mountain are caused