

2004

Sergeant James Smallwood
Ranger James Venaleck
Ranger Mark Reid

Lake Metroparks Rangers

Of all the jobs in local law enforcement, being a park ranger sounds like it would be the easiest, the cushiest, the least dangerous. After all, you spend your time where people are having fun, spending time with families, and enjoying nature. However, any situation which could affect a city police officer, can and does affect the rangers. This was prove to the citizens of Lake County in the early summer of 2004.

On June 19, 2004, Sergeant James Smallwood was patrolling in Chapin Forest. He was in a restricted area which was once a mining and quarrying operation. There are loose and unstable gravel cliffs, some as high as 100 feet. Smallwood noticed a man, in his forties, sitting dangerously close to the edge of one of the cliffs.

Sergeant Smallwood began talking to the man and noted that he was extremely despondent and was contemplating jumping off. Smallwood called for assistance from other rangers, and began what turned out to be a 50 minute conversation with the man. Even as he tried to persuade him not to jump, the man's legs were dangling over the cliff. On two occasions, he stood and threatened to jump.

Rangers Reid and Venaleck arrived and assessed the situation. They weighed their options and approached the male from behind. At the last moment, all three grabbed the subject and tried to pull him away from the edge.

As they struggled, the male went over the edge, and at one point, Venaleck was on his stomach, arms down over the edge of the cliff, hanging on to the subject. Finally, the male slid out of the officers grasps. However, the actions of the officers caused him to slide against the side of the cliff on the way down instead of plunging to the bottom.

The male was soon rescued and transported to the hospital for treatment of his injuries.

Smallwood would state that as soon as he began talking to the male, he knew he intended to jump. He attempted to keep up a conversation, although it was hard. The male seemed to be in his own world. Smallwood played on the fact that the next day was father's day and the man had three daughters. He hoped that the conversation would allow his fellow rangers to arrive, and it worked. The outcome was the result of a

team effort. “I was just hoping that whatever happened, that some other officers were going to help out, that they would be there - and they were.”

Reid would comment that he hadn't been particularly heroic. “It's not something I do every day, but it's part of my job.”

Venaleck stated that “I don't like heights, but I don't think it would be an option not to help.”

The three rangers were nominated for the award by Chief Ranger Mike Burko. Burko stated that it was clear that the actions of the three officers saved the man's life.

They were honored on February 23, 2005 at the LaMalfa Center.