

HEROES ON THE

Story by Deb Hooker
Photos by Mark Davis

As he sat at the kitchen table working the crossword puzzle in the Lincoln Journal, Chuck Woll, an architecture major at UNL, didn't seem unusual. The tall, mustached man didn't look up from his task except to flip the ashes from his Winston into the small ashtray on the table.

Then the bell rang.

Woll jumped up, grabbed his jacket, and headed out the door with his partner for the evening, Nate White. The two men climbed into Unit 8, a basic life support ambulance, and fastened their seat belts. They spoke some foreign mathematical language into a radio, turned on the siren and the lights and sped out of the driveway.

Woll dodged cars all the way from 41st and Vine streets to 60th and Baldwin streets. He and White arrived at the scene to find a fire engine and a heart team from Bryan Hospital already there. A crowd of people gathered around a 20-year-old woman lying on the snow-covered corner.

"You'd think she'd wear a seatbelt since she's pregnant," one of the firefighters mumbled out of the women's earshot.

"She's bumped her head," a nurse from the heart team said to White and Woll. "Get her in, right away."

They lifted the hysterical woman onto a stretcher and loaded her into the ambulance. The nurse spoke soothingly to her as she tried to determine the extent of the woman's injuries. They didn't look serious, but the woman had to go to the hospital just to make sure, the nurse declared.

The woman's husband rode in the passenger seat while Woll hurried to Saint Elizabeth's Community Health Center, 555 S. 70th St. White sat in the back and continued what the nurse had started. He checked the woman's eyes, head and legs for injury, speaking quietly to her the entire time.

By the time the ambulance pulled into the hospital's emergency drive, the woman was calm.

On the way back to their station, neither Woll nor White spoke about the

incident except to explain what had happened.

Reluctance to talk about their jobs seems to be a common trait among the paramedics and emergency medical technicians at Eastern Ambulance. Eastern, the only ambulance service in Lincoln, employs 12 university students.

Russel Bayer, who owns the service with Mike Dodge and Marty Miller, said the paramedics, who qualify for advanced life support, and EMTs don't talk about their calls because the job is so stressful that dwelling on the incidents would drive them crazy.

White, who is not a student, agreed, adding that the paramedics and EMTs have to try to joke about the situations.

"You've got to get to the place where you can laugh about it or it will really haunt you," he said.

However, some of the accidents hit them hard, they said. Woll said helping children and young women bothered him the most.

White said his worst experience was the first time someone died while he was trying to save them.

"That's the call that you remember forever. You can see that one in vivid color," he said.

Full-time employees at Eastern Ambulance work on what Bayer called the ABC system. They work 24-hour shifts every other day until they have worked 72 hours. Then, Bayer said, they get four days off. He said the system's main advantage is that it makes sure everyone has some weekends free. However, sleeping at the station can be a problem.

"There's nothing like going to bed at 11 at night, and knowing that you are going to be awakened at least 3 times," he said.

Eight of the 12 students employed by Eastern are full-time workers, Bayer said. The others fill in on busy shifts and during vacations.

Jeanine Cook, who is studying physiology at UNL, works at Eastern 60 to 65 hours per week. She said she doesn't worry about her busy schedule leaving her little time for fun.

"If you don't have a social life, you can't ruin it," she said.

