

everyday heroes



They protect us from danger, put themselves at risk and talk us through some of the hardest times in our lives. Jo Lennox talks to four women for whom saving and changing lives is all in a day's work. Photography: Henrique Wilding.

the policewoman

Chantel Boonzaaier, 23, is one of the few female police dog handlers with Cape Town's Pinelands Dog Unit. Every day, she goes into dangerous situations that require firm resolve, a fearless heart and a strong mind.

"Fighting crime and criminals means coming face to face with violence on a daily basis. I've always wanted to serve the community and when my plans to become a social worker fell through, policing seemed to be the other option. I've been in the service for about three years; after two years of administrative work with the uniformed branch in Khayelitsha, I joined the Pinelands dog unit and became more involved in fieldwork.

"I'm one of only four women in a team of 100 at the dog unit — this is perceived as a man's job, and although I was treated differently at first, I've proved that I can handle things with the same

confidence as any man. I have to put in a bit more effort because I'm not as strong physically as the men, but we've received the same training and they've accepted me as part of the team.

"My shift normally starts at 6am and by 7am, my partner, myself and our dogs are on the road. We're often called out for house break-ins, when we search the premises with the dogs. The suspects might still be in the house, so we generally send the dogs in first and then go in after them.

"Investigating bomb threats, attempted murders, robberies and searching for firearms are all part of the job. When I'm working, I try not to think about the fact that I'm risking my life. It's only at the end of a 12-hour shift — when I relive the day's events at home — that I become aware of the danger I was in.

"When I get called out, my trained response takes over. Once, while on foot patrol in Khayelitsha, a man appeared from nowhere and held a gun to my head. I ducked out of the way and, after we arrested him, we discovered that the gun was fake. But it could have been real ...

"We deal with the ugly side of life, and it's the deaths of innocent victims that affect me most deeply — people dying during a house break-in or children getting caught in the crossfire of rival gangs, for example. A few months ago, a police reservist friend of mine was killed while searching a house for firearms.

"My job is dangerous and stressful, but I get wonderful support from my family and friends. My boyfriend of five years is also on the force and we deal with the stress by openly discussing our fears, failures and triumphs. It's still hard on my family and my mother lies awake at night worrying about me when I'm working.

"Police often take the blame for the high crime rate, but we don't get paid overtime, we put our lives at risk, we catch criminals and, after working through all the paperwork, the justice system often lets them go. The job can be frustrating, but I believe that the community is becoming more aware of our problems.

"It's still rewarding when my dog tackles a suspect and I slam handcuffs on him and put him in



chantel faces violence every day



margie helps abused women find their own strength



lianne braves angry seas, six-foot waves and wild winds



monya-mika's work ranges from car accidents, gun attacks and assaults to heart attacks and suicides

the van. After that, I remain hopeful that I won't be chasing the same man in a few months time."

the emergency rescue worker

Often the first on a crash scene or responding to a gunshot call in the ganglands, 24-year-old Monya-Mika Moore regularly takes her life into her hands. She has been an ambulance emergency assistant since she was a teenager.

“I joined the St Johns Ambulance Service when I was 16 and volunteered during weekends and school holidays. After two years' basic training, I was faced with my first emergency situation — a three-year-old boy was run over by a car and I rushed to his side. After doing my first real resuscitation, the paramedics took over. Sadly, the boy died. But I knew then that I wanted to do this for the rest of my life.

“I now work full-time for Metro Rescue and do volunteer work for other organisations. I'm also studying further and hope to be a qualified paramedic by December.

“Emergency Services is a specialised field,

involving a lot more than medical training. I've also completed a rescue course, in which I learned to operate equipment like the jaws of life and mastered fire fighting.

“Calls vary from serious bus and car accidents, gunshots and assaults to heart attacks and attempted suicides. We receive an average of 35 calls per ambulance every day — most of which are critical. Our response time should ideally be about three minutes, but with only 16 ambulances available on a shift, we struggle to reach all patients in time.

“Critical calls often involve rescue helicopters, and assisting with these is what I enjoy most. There are few paramedics in the outlying areas of Cape Town and we attend to calls as far as Worcester, Beaufort West and Laingsburg. We cover all the major highways, and serious car crash victims are fetched from across the country. The helicopters also transport critical patients from all hospitals and clinics to Cape Town's Grootte Schuur or Tygerberg hospitals.

“I work 12-hour shifts which often become longer. When I'm on standby, I can be called out at any time. It's a high-performance job and I need to be clear-headed all the time. I have been intimidated by people who believe that this isn't a woman's job, but most men on my team

know that I can do it just as well as any man. I used to be the only female on my shift, but we're definitely growing in numbers. My goal is to become the first woman to complete the Advanced Rescue Course — I know I can do it.

“daily, I deal with death and see many seriously injured and deformed patients. My worst call ever was to the crash site of a light aircraft. The bodies of the crew were charred beyond recognition and the smell stayed with me for hours afterwards. Sometimes the job takes an emotional toll. People often quit because they can't handle the stress, but the only answer is to make time for yourself.

“I deal with many patients daily and although I try not to get emotionally involved, your heart must be touched. I once tended to a crash victim who fractured his spine, and afterwards I visited him every day in hospital. Three years later, I saw him at the training college and was amazed that he was walking again. He said that I had inspired him to become a paramedic. And on St Valentine's Day I received warm wishes from an elderly man whom we'd rushed to hospital after a heart attack. Those are the patients who keep you going and make the job worth it.”

“It’s hard when you know that the chances of survival are slim and that families are waiting anxiously.”

the counsellor

Margie Kopke, 47, is a counsellor at Cape Town’s Nicro centre, which provides support to abused women. Every day, she tries to break the cycle of pain, humiliation and degradation that they experience.

“**H**aving taught high school English for years, I was looking for a new challenge. I love working with people and have always been interested in psychology, so I went back to university, and I’ve just completed my psychology honours degree. I wanted to make a difference to women’s lives, and because of my interest in gender issues, I decided to join the Nicro centre which provides support to abused women.

“During the year in which I’ve been a volunteer counsellor, I’ve come across so many heartbreaking stories ... women who’ve been physically, emotionally, sexually and financially abused. They often need crisis counselling after experiencing horrific incidents and we try to give them the support that they need.

“These women are often crippled by the abuse they suffer. Counselling provides a safe space in which they can sort out their feelings of anger, confusion and depression. After listening, I provide practical information about how the law can protect a woman and the resources she can use to leave an abusive partner and live on her own — if that’s what she wants. I also focus on her inner strengths — on things that she can do for herself.

“Helping these women to discover how strong they are is the most gratifying part of my job. They need to understand the relationship they’re in and the reasons why they stay or return to their partners after suffering abuse — some are financially bound, some are worried about their children, and some fear the disapproval of their church and parents. Society often judges them. By listening, I help lift their load and help them to understand that their cycle of violence has to end. When they come to us they’ve already taken the first step — they’ve realised that they need help.

“When a woman explains how she was beaten with the butt of a rifle, punched in her stomach, stabbed or threatened with a knife, you can’t help but reach out to her. These stories are always dis-

turbing and you realise that many of these women haven’t experienced love or caring for a long time. When they break down, I often cry with them and console them, but I’m confident and emotionally stable, and able to give them the support they need. I’ve learned to separate work from home.

“It’s devastating when a woman I’ve helped to leave her abusive partner can’t afford to live on her own, and she goes back to him. Society provides no alternative. We often face disappointments, but it’s worth it when someone leaves a session with greater calmness and perspective, and although my work is hard, it’s very enriching because I’m growing all the time.”

the sea rescuer

Thirty-three-year-old Lianne Roper is one of two female coxswains with the National Sea Rescue Institute. Led to her profession by her love of the sea, she has learned to respect the ocean’s ever-changing moods. She has been a volunteer rescuer for five years.

“**I** come from a family of ocean lovers and have always had a passion for the sea. I joined the National Sea Rescue Institute because I wanted to give something back to the community, and I could do that through something that I loved.

“For the first year, I wasn’t allowed to go out to sea. After three years of rescue-orientated training, I received coxswain status. I’m the skipper of a ‘wave rider’ — a type of rubberduck and normally the first boat to reach a rescue scene. I’m trained in navigation, wave riding, radio operating, fire fighting and first aid, and I’m one of only two female coxswains in South Africa.

“Rescue missions can be very dangerous, but when people are in trouble, you have to try to bring them to safety. You need to be bold and can’t allow your emotions to get in the way. It’s hard when you know that the chances of survival are slim and that families are waiting anxiously.

“There are four crews at the Hout Bay station — one is on standby for seven days, every four weeks. During that weekend, we undergo training, and when I’m on duty, I carry a pager and must be within 10 minutes of the base.

“Many of our operations involve fishing vessels

with engine trouble or which have capsized due to overloading or high seas. Yachts, ski boats and divers often call for help because of the area’s unpredictable weather.

“As skipper of the quick response boat, my two-member crew and I are the first to be sent out. Searching for a boat or a missing person can take several hours or until the Port Captain calls off the search. After assessing the situation, I often have to decide whether we can handle it alone or if we need to call in the main rescue boat.

“We always stay in close contact with the controller at the base — on my shift, it’s often my husband, Chris. He and I met when I was still considering joining the NSRI and he decided to join too. We got married a year ago. Chris and my crew, Ernst and David, provide great support when we’re out on a rescue. The men at the station are great and have never had a problem with my being female. They know that I do my job well, and that’s what counts.

“A year ago, I was part of an amazing rescue for which I received the Meritorious Service Award for bravery. A 7.7-metre yacht with two men and a woman on board was sailing from Cape Town to Hout Bay when its motor failed. They couldn’t raise sail and faced wrecking on nearby rocks. Two boats, including mine, were sent out to sea in six-metre swells and strong winds. We were delayed by peak-hour traffic and only hit the water 20 minutes after the first boat was launched.

“Our station commander, Peter Adamo, was in charge of the first rescue boat and he made every effort to save the crew, facing a stormy and dangerous sea, which soon overturned the yacht and threw the people on board into the water. The two men were hanging onto the yacht’s upturned hull, while the woman was in the water. Peter and his crew managed to haul her out. It was almost dark when my crew and I arrived on the scene and we had to act quickly. I didn’t hesitate to take my boat through the swirling waters to pluck the two men off the sinking yacht. By the time we’d rescued the second man, the water was up to his chin.

“This can be physically and emotionally draining work. We sacrifice a lot of time, receive no payment and often get bad publicity for not responding in time when receiving a late call. But, we all work towards a common goal — and the reward is saving lives.”