

Search and Rescue Leader Is Volunteer of the Year

By Scott Harrop

It all started when Volunteer of the Year **Gideon Bernstein**'s daughters took an interest in horses. They arranged to volunteer at Horse Hill Preserve, the Mill Valley pasture where owners allow their horses to roam free. While tending to the horses, they met Marin County Parks volunteer **Robert Eichstadt**. Robert suggested that Gideon's teen daughter June look into volunteering for Marin Search and Rescue (SAR), and his pitch intrigued Gideon, too.

At first it seemed like too much of a time commitment. Gideon and his wife Nancy, both in finance, had two other daughters to care for. But Nancy was supportive, noting that if Gideon and June joined SAR together it would count as family time.

A New York native, Gideon developed a love for the outdoors at summer camp in the Adirondacks. After attending Haverford College in Pennsylvania and earning an MBA from the University of Virginia, he worked at Merrill Lynch before moving to San Francisco in 2004.

Living in Mill Valley, he was able to enjoy nature almost every day after work, but Search and Rescue offered "a justification for spending a lot of time outdoors."

Starting in 2018 and training together, father and daughter quickly realized just how time-consuming SAR could be. Volunteers are always on call and must complete three required trainings plus optional courses in medical assistance, navigation, and rope rescue systems.

Gideon later managed the team's fundraising, soliciting donations for gear, vehicles, and trainings. (See his profile in the December 2023 [MarinfoNOW](#).)

When Covid hit, Gideon committed to training a dog with the California Rescue Dog Association. His first canine, Siberia, lacked the necessary drive, forcing him to withdraw her from the program. Soon afterward, a breeder contacted him about an 11-month-old male he named Bruce.

Now Bruce accompanies him on most callouts. Last April, the pair found an Alzheimer's patient in Sebastopol who had wandered off without his walker and fallen. Bruce located the man after a team of firefighters had narrowly missed him the night before.

(Siberia, now Bruce's emotional support dog, stays home with the family when Bruce is out in the field.)

As Gideon became more involved, he was elected SAR Boot Camp manager and began overseeing a multi-day, 80-hour exercise including trail rescues working with a litter and wheel, and overnight camping without tents or sleeping bags.

“You have to be ready to survive with just what’s in your pack, in case the helicopter isn’t able to pick you up on schedule,” he says.

Marin County is the focus, but SAR’s 120 volunteers respond to rescues throughout California, from Los Angeles to the Oregon border.

Callouts average 50 to 60 a year. Most are resolved quickly but typically about a dozen become full-blown searches. Years ago, most calls involved lost hikers, but those became less common as location technology improved. Nowadays, people with dementia are one of the largest categories of missing people.

Gideon appreciates it when people see him in uniform and thank him for his service, but he is also amused. “Why are they thanking me?” he asks. “I’m getting more out of this than I’m putting into it!”

Quite a statement, considering his level of dedication. SAR’s staff coordinator, Sheriff’s Lt. **Pierre Ahuncain**, describes Gideon as “an incredibly dedicated volunteer. Just one example is that he had nearly 900 volunteer hours of service with the team in 2025 alone.”

Gideon says SAR volunteering is truly rewarding. “Before this I was just going through life; now I have a sense of purpose in the community.”

The Board of Supervisors recognized him for “providing guidance and practical support, demonstrating compassion and kindness, supporting the principles of public safety, and embodying the spirit of service.” Board President **Eric Lucan** presented Gideon with a resolution of commendation and the 2025-2026 Volunteer of the Year award during a special ceremony on May 18 at the Marin Civic Center.

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