



THE PLAIN DEALER

Man receives award from Bush

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Air Force One landings are a television news staple. The coverage usually runs something like this: After the plane touches down, the camera cuts to a shot of the president exiting the aircraft and waving to news photographers. Then he descends a set of stairs to the tarmac, where he greets someone important.

Last Thursday, though, the guy at the bottom of the stairs waiting for President George W. Bush was Northfield Center resident T.J. Powell.

Powell was there to receive the President's Volunteer Service Award, a prize created for people who have demonstrated dedication to giving their time and talents for the benefit of others.

The president came down and met with the governor and a couple of the state representatives, Powell said. Then he came and shook my hand, thanked me for the service work I've done, and gave me a pin.

The pin is a small token of appreciation for years of voluntary work on Powell's part.

Powell is president and chief of the Northeast Ohio Medical Reserve Corps, an organization of emergency service professionals who volunteer their time to provide medical help at charity functions and assist other agencies during disasters.

The group was formed as the Northeast Ohio Public Service Volunteers but recently changed its name.

We began using that name last year, Powell said. Before that, we didn't have any kind of official legal status.

Medical reserve corps around the country are affiliated with the USA Freedom Corps. Bush created the Freedom Corps in 2002 after he called on all Americans to volunteer 4,000 hours during their lifetimes.

Even under the group's old name, Powell was an active volunteer, giving 800-1,000 hours of his time each year.

He and other NEOMRC volunteers have been at a host of charity events, especially walks and races such as the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, March of Dimes WalkAmerica, and Pedal to the Point for the Multiple Sclerosis Society.

We're there to provide pre-hospital care and communications support, he said.

In addition to his work with the medical reserve corps, Powell also volunteered for the American Red Cross from 1992-1997 and served eight years on Northfield Center's volunteer fire department.

That dedication to aiding others is what prompted NEOMRC Vice President and Assistant Chief Robert G. Fehlner to nominate him for the award.

Things started on Monday, when several organizations in Cleveland were contacted by the office of the President and asked to nominate deserving individuals, Fehlner said in a piece posted on the group's Web site. I nominated T.J. for all he has done and all he continues to do for our organization.

Within a day Fehlner had sent the nomination, along with a history of the medical reserve corps and Powell's personal information, for a background check. Later that afternoon the president's spokesperson called again to inform him that Powell's nomination had been accepted.

It all happened really quickly, Powell said. I got the call, and less than two days later, I was meeting the president.

After the award presentation, Powell joined Bush's motorcade to the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, where the president spoke. The president could not resist including an anecdote about Powell in his talk.

(America's) true strength is the fact that we've got citizens from all walks of life who are willing to volunteer a thousand hours a year to make someone's life better, Bush said. I thank you for the example you've set, T.J.

Powell has returned to his day to day life as an engineer for the Ohio Department of Transportation, husband and father. But soon he'll have another reminder of his award experience.

One of the official photographers took a picture of me and the president under the presidential seal on the side of the plane, he said. Once it's developed, they'll send it. I should have it in four to six weeks.

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