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Local volunteer saluted by president: T.J. Powell awarded medal by Commander-in-Chief

by Eric Marotta

Editor

Northfield Center - More than a decade of volunteerism earned civil engineer Thomas J. Powell recognition by the president last Thursday.

Soon after Air Force One touched down, President George W. Bush awarded Powell the President's Volunteer Service Award.

Bush would later introduce Powell to an audience of several hundred at a seminar on technology and health care.

"In my State of the Union, I'm going to talk about the strengths of our country, the economy and our military, and we intend to keep it strong to keep the peace. But the true strength is the fact that we've got citizens from all walks of life who are willing to volunteer a 1,000 hours a year to make somebody's life better. I thank you for the example you've set, T.J.," Bush said at the Cleveland Clinic event.

It all happened quickly, Powell said, as area volunteer groups were asked to submit nominees just three days prior to the president's Cleveland visit.

"They were looking for nominees on Monday, they interviewed me on Tuesday, I found out Wednesday," Powell said.

Powell serves as chief of the Northeast Ohio Medical Reserve Corps., a volunteer organization he says was organized in October under the auspices of the USA Freedom Corps.

The group formed about four months ago and has about 20 members whose mission Powell said include providing pre-hospital care and or communications support to the general public at large events and to assist local safety forces in the event of disaster.

He said all members of the unit are volunteers, and added the group is organized as a non-profit entity and is presently working on obtaining status as a non-profit corporation.

"We started this organization back in October, but I've been volunteering and doing things for 13 years," he said.

A civil engineer who works for the Ohio Department of Transportation's District 4 in Akron, Powell is a project manager and designer who oversees projects ranging from road resurfacing to bridge replacements.

Projects he has worked on in the Nardon Hills area include bridge work on Route 91 and resurfacing on Route 82.

In recognition of his volunteer service, Powell was invited to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport

last Thursday to greet the president and traveled with him to his official events that day.

“I was at the bottom of the stairs as he came off of Air Force One,” he said, adding the president greeted Gov. Bob Taft and other Ohio politicians. “He shook my hand, presented me with the pin and they took the photograph.”

Powell said he was told it would take a couple of weeks to receive the official certificate and a photograph of the event.

“After we finished there, I went in the motorcade down with them to the Cleveland Clinic and then I came back with them,” Powell said. “It was very overwhelming and I felt very honored.”

Powell said the president seems “like a very regular type of guy.”

“He thanked me for my service and asked me how things were going with it. He said America needs to have volunteers,” Powell said.

“I told him it’s going very well and we’re moving ahead with the organization. I thanked him for giving us the ability to have this organization formed.”

Powell said he got his start in volunteering as an amateur radio operator, which led him to enroll in emergency medical training and to a tour on the Northfield Center Fire Department from 1994 to 2002.

“I became involved in public service events as an amateur radio operator and wanted to provide medical services at those events,” he said.

One of the main events Powell helps organize is the annual “Pedal to the Point” bicycle tour hosted by the Buckeye Chapter of the Multiple Sclerosis Society.

“For the past 10 or 12 years, I’ve organized all their volunteer communications support,” he said.

Powell said that following publicity about his award, the Northeast Ohio Medical Reserve Corps has received numerous inquiries from individuals interested in starting similar organizations.

“It’s pretty amazing, since we got recognized. We’ve gotten a lot of interest from people around the state, trying to form their own groups,” he said, adding hits to the group’s Web site, www.neomrc.org, have increased from about 100 per day to about 1,000 per day.

And NEOMRC is still recruiting, he added.

“You just have to have a desire,” Powell said. “A lot of our members are emergency medical technicians; we have paramedics, nurses and amateur radio operators.”

Still relatively new, the organization meets at the Garfield Heights Fire Department and is just beginning training related to its mission.

He said the first class is titled “community emergency response.”

“In the future we’ll be offering those classes,” he said. “We’re still trying to figure out how to do them.”

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