

We have news for you

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Wasco chats up a couple of guys in a booth — two of only four customers in the restaurant Wasco, a San Diego native, moved to Lancaster County as a dart-on-the-map kind of venture.

With family living at the other end of the country, working on Christmas doesn't seem like such a big deal.

"It doesn't matter when you celebrate Christmas," Wasco says. "If you ask me, it's become too commercial anyway."

With that, she launches into Black Friday horror stories and eventually moves off to attend to new customers. It's just after 2 a.m., and business is picking up a little.

One of the few places open after the bars close, Waffle House gets some surly late-night traffic, and the address is not unknown to the police and ambulance crews in town.

Always on call

But tonight, a melee breaks out somewhere else in the city, outside a bar. When emergency workers show up, there's plenty of blood, but everyone's gone.

Lancaster EMS took five calls between midnight and 2 a.m., but now the scanner has fallen silent and the members of Platoon B take a minute to relax in their substation at Lancaster Regional Medical Center.

If not for the bank of computers on the south wall, their alcove could be a living room, with plush purple couches and a television. A Santa hat hangs over the back of an overstuffed chair that holds a Drunken Reindeer plush toy, part of a gag-gift exchange.

Spread out across a festive holly-print tablecloth is their feast: mashed potatoes in a slow cooker, baked ham, baked corn, chocolate bundt cake, salad, rolls, Turkey Hill iced tea and soda. Someone

baked brownies, too.

They eat out of plastic cups, and one of the guys complains to duty supervisor Greg Arntz that he found lumps in his mashed potatoes. It's the kind of barb families usually toss across the holiday dinner table.

This crew clearly constitutes a family.

"I work a lot of overtime ... so I see these people all the time," says Arntz, a 19-year emergency services veteran. "I probably see them more than I see my wife sometimes."

Arntz will next see his wife after he clocks out at 7 a.m. His boys, 7 and 10, will want to open presents when he gets home. But there's still a ways to go, and the night holds untold surprises.

"Where are the plates?" EMT James Weber asks as he bursts into the room.

Weber, the resident "call hog," just got back from attending to an unresponsive gentleman, and he's hungry. A transplant from Philadelphia, Weber, 29, likes to keep his motor running. He ran with a crew in Camden, N.J., for five years, and he's still adjusting to Lancaster's on-again, off-again pace.

By contrast, paramedic David Rathbun, quietly attending to paperwork at one of the computers, displays the calm of a longtime veteran. Here's a guy who works a full-time job designing spinal implants for children and still puts in 12 to 20 hours a week with the ambulance crew, and he's a fireman to boot. He's done EMS for 16 years and fire and rescue for 20. Rathbun's working tonight so that a single mom on staff can spend Christmas morning with her children.

Then the call comes in. Somewhere in Lancaster an expectant mother has awakened to what she believes are contractions. Weber and Rathbun pile into the ambulance, and they're off.

Mother Nature, it seems, holds little regard for holidays: People expire, babies are born and cows continue to produce milk.

Somehow, someone must attend to all of them.

Down on the farm

At a dairy farm in Landisville, Audrey Breneman is about a half-hour into the 3:30 a.m. milking of some 285 cows. "The girls," as she



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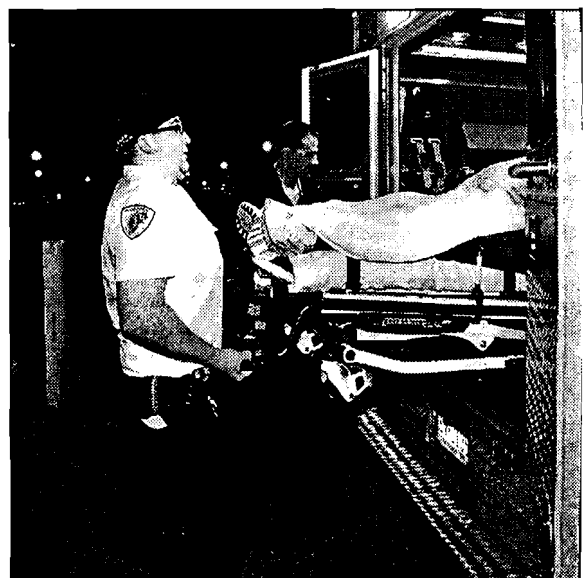


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Among those laboring on Christmas Day are, from top, dairy farmer Audrey Breneman, the producers and reporters of WGAL-TV, EMT James Weber, left, and paramedic David Rathbun of Lancaster EMS, Sunday News Managing Editor Barbara Hough Roda, below left, and Lancaster Newspapers prepress supervisor Heidi Taylor.

Sunday News

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in the milk house as Audrey, 29, and her assistant, 22-year-old Caitlin Stoltz, navigate a 40-foot sunken walkway lined by nine cows on either side, udders at eye level. They

the next two days, and they'll spend some time together after they finish the milk shift