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Sea Cadet performs first rescue

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By Jan Ramming Special to The COURIER News

The U.S. Navy's Sea Cadet Corps is training today's youths to be tomorrow's heroes.

For 16-year-old Mike Bellavia of Geneva, a hero's challenge came early -- while he was on vacation.

Mike, his 15-year-old brother Steve, and parents Nick and Rhonda Bellavia were on a hotel shuttle bus at the Port of Miami recently. The bus was making frequent stops to pick up travelers and their luggage. At one particular stop, the driver got out to help some passengers, and the bus started moving forward.

"At first we thought it might be just rolling a few inches, but it kept on rolling and rolling, faster," said Rhonda. "There was another shuttle bus stopped ahead of us, and people were standing behind that bus. We were on a collision course with them."

Mike, who was sitting closest to the driver's seat, jumped up and applied the brakes -- just in time.

"The two vehicles got so close that one of the people behind the other bus put his hand up on our front bumper to try and stop it," Rhonda said.

What could have been a catastrophe turned out safely for everyone, thanks to Mike's quick action.

"I just did what I thought to do first," Mike said. "I looked back at everyone else on our bus, and they were all just freaking out."

Mike kept a cool head, perhaps due to the training he is receiving from the Sea Cadets. The program is open to American youths ages 13 to 17 who have a desire to learn about the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Merchant Marines.

Mike and his brother Steve have been in the Sea Cadet program since June 2005. Their cadet unit meets twice per month in Naperville for full-day drills. The unit is structured after the military and is headed by a commanding officer.

All new cadets enter the program at the rank of seaman recruit. To move up through the ranks, they must complete training courses and exams. The highest rank is chief petty officer, to which Mike already has been promoted. The high school junior is happy to accept the responsibility.

"It's great," he said about the program. "We get to wear actual Navy uniforms, and we can go to naval bases all over the world. There are foreign exchange programs, so that I can spend two weeks in England or China or anywhere."

The cadets' advanced training consists of schools in every aspect of the Navy, from airman and air traffic controller to shipboard and submarine training.

"There are hundreds of programs to choose from," Mike said. "You can even go through a mini Seal camp -- that's pretty hard-core stuff."

Mike enjoys anything aviation related, and he was able to go to a Naval Air station in Fort Worth, Texas, last summer. He worked alongside the Navy petty officers at their jobs.

"I got to work as a mechanic in three different squadrons, and we got to work right on the flight line when the planes were out," he said.

"Pilots who have been in the Navy for 20 years had no idea that a 16-year-old kid was guiding those huge multimillion-dollar planes around the tarmac. It was just amazing."