

Making a difference

By Kelly Harrell

How much of an impact do you have on someone else's life? If you work in EMS and trauma systems, plenty. The following stories are just a few of the thousands of times every day emergency health care providers have changed lives. In honor of EMS Week May 18-24, and Trauma Awareness Month, we salute those who make a difference.

Connie Snell
Date: December 27, 2002
Responding: CE-Bar Volunteer Fire Department, Austin-Travis County EMS



"I think the most amazing thing is that they had a brand-new AED in the car. If the AED hadn't gotten there in minutes, I wouldn't be here."

Connie Snell credits Shuggy, her dog, with alerting her husband that she had gone into cardiac arrest. Volunteers from CE-Bar Volunteer Fire Department responded quickly and Austin-Travis County EMS transported her.

When the pit bull puppy, bloodied and hungry, showed up in Connie Snell's driveway, she wasn't exactly thrilled. But she and husband Jerry ended up nursing the puppy back to health and

adopting it. They named her Shuggy. "This dog is going to save our lives someday," she remembers telling Jerry. And Shuggy did save Connie's life, along with some help for CE-Bar Volunteer Fire Department, Austin-Travis

County EMS medics, and her husband. Connie was playing computer solitaire one lazy Sunday morning when she began to feel tired. She went to lay down and that's the last thing she remembers. Jerry was reading the paper in the living room when Shuggy began to howl and bark – unusual for the dog. Then Jerry heard something else: a strange noise coming from the bedroom. It was Connie, who had gone into cardiac arrest and was having agonal respirations. When Jerry went into the bedroom, he saw Connie's eyes had rolled back, her tongue was protruding and her skin turning a deep purple. He immediately called 9-1-1 and began the CPR he had learned 40 years earlier while serving in the military. While the dispatcher walked Jerry through CPR, a call went out to CE-Bar Volunteer Fire Department. Two young volunteers happened to be nearby; one of them had a brand-new AED in his car. After two shocks, medics got back a pulse. That wasn't the end, though. Connie went into seizures while she was in the ambulance, triggering fears of brain damage. Doctors decided to try something new: they lowered Connie's core temperature for three days then brought her temperature up slowly. It worked. Today Connie has no neurological deficits. Ironically, thirty years ago

Connie's father had been a pioneer in hibernation research – a technique that ultimately saved his daughter. Today, she's a volunteer for the Sudden Cardiac Arrest Association (www.sudden-cardiac-arrest.org) and a supporter of AEDs.

"I think the most amazing thing is that they had a brand-new AED in the car. If the AED hadn't gotten there in minutes, I wouldn't be here," she says.

Sheila Nunnelee

Date: June 6, 2007

Responding: Houston Fire Department

It was just a simple lunchtime trip. Last June, Sheila Nunnelee and a co-worker headed to the co-worker's house for lunch. As they exited I-45 onto I-10 in the co-worker's Nissan Pathfinder, traffic slowed. Behind them, a Ford F350 hauling oil field equipment on a trailer slammed into the back of the Pathfinder, sending it skidding across four lanes of traffic and into the path of an 18-wheeler. The Pathfinder ended up in the same place it began, pointed in the opposite direction.

The co-worker wasn't injured badly. Nunnelee was not so lucky. She sustained a major concussion, puncture wounds, facial, pelvic and limb fractures and plenty of lacerations. Blood from deep lacerations covered the car's interior and her co-worker. Emergency crews had to cut her out of the car. She remembers little, except for the sound

of Paramedic Steve Scott's voice and touch.

"(His voice) was so constantly the same and soothing. You knew that everything's being taken care of," Nunnelee says.

Nunnelee spent time in the hospital and has since returned to work. She met her rescuers at a ceremony in December.

"I surprised all of us," she says. "Nobody thought I would be alive."



"(Steve Scott's voice) was so constantly the same and soothing. You knew that everything's being taken care of."

Back row, from left, HFD members Frank Taska, EMT; Brian Taylor, EMT; Capt. Joseph Noack, EMT-P; Steve Scott, FF/EMT-P; Sheila Nunnelee; Senior Capt. John Miller, EMT; and Jose Garcia, EMT. Front row, from left, HFD EMS Assistant Chief Adrian Trevino, EMT-P; Rene Gomez, FF/EMT; and Brady Russell, FF/EMT. Photo: HFD EMS Administrative Coordinator Diana J. Rodríguez, EMT.

Ben Coniam

Date: January 14, 2004

Responding: Schertz EMS

All Ben Coniam remembers is headlights coming toward him and thinking he was about to get hit. Then... nothing. But others remember. It was around 11 p.m. and Coniam and his girlfriend were in her car. On their way home, Coniam's girlfriend turned left in front of pick-up truck. The truck slammed into the passenger side where Coniam sat. The impact broke his hip, back and five ribs, and caused facial fractures, collapsed lung and internal damage. He was told his right femur essentially exploded from a combination compression and twisting fracture. He was transported to the Brooke Army Medical Center, a Level I trauma facility, where he stayed for three weeks. After plenty of rehab at home, he went back to work. But he has not forgotten the reason he's still here.

"I gave them a thank you dinner, and I go back every year on that date to talk to them and say thanks," Coniam says.

Robert Gasson

Date: June 13, 2004

Responding: Houston Fire Department

Robert Gasson had learned plenty about physical fitness in the Marines. Unfortunately, he'd forgotten a lot of it in years since he left the service. August 16, 2004, was a typical sweltering Sunday in Houston. Storms had moved through, leaving behind heat and humidity. Gasson, 45 at the time, was at home when he got a call from his supervisor. The storms had knocked out the power to their office building. Gasson, who worked on the building's telephone system, needed to come in. Gasson typically works alone, but on this day his supervisor had decided to accompany him. That was a lucky decision.

Together, they climbed the 29 flights of stairs to the phone system hub. A little while later, Gasson began to sweat and feel tired. When he laid down on the floor, his supervisor called 9-1-1.

That was the right call: Gasson was having a heart attack. Since there was still no power, Houston Fire Department personnel hauled the 60 pounds of equipment up the 29 stories to get to the patient. Medics found a fax machine and sent the electrocardiogram results to Memorial Hermann, where a doctor confirmed that Gasson was having a heart attack. Rescuers brought Gasson back down the stairs in a Stoke's basket – all the while using flashlights. These

days, Gasson is watching his health more closely. He's running four

Houston Fire Department medics climbed 29 floors of a Houston high-rise during a power outage to get to Robert Gasson, who was having a heart attack. From left, HFD Fire Chief Phil Boriski; EMS Assistant Chief Mike Ivy (retired); Gerardo Rey, EMT-P; Robert Gasson; Steve Scott, EMT-P; and EMS Physician Director and Houston Public Health Authority Dr. David E. Persse. Photo credit: Matt Milam



"I would like to thank them again for... giving me the opportunity to watch my daughter grow up."

days a week and keeping fit through exercise. And he's happy to be alive.

"I would like to thank them again for saving my life and giving me the opportunity to watch my daughter grow up," he says.

Christopher Richardson

Date: August 6, 2007

Responding: Haslet Volunteer Fire Department, MedStar, PHI Air Medical

Christopher Richardson does not remember the impact that sheared his legs off and threw his body thirty feet. He knows he was riding his motorcycle, and he's been able to piece together what happened by talking to rescuers and listening to the 9-1-1 call. It was about 3 a.m. on August 6, 2007. Richardson was riding his motorcycle near Haslet in northern Tarrant County. He hit a roadside sign. Richardson's legs were torn off by the impact. At 3:02 a.m., a bystander called 9-1-1. By chance, several volunteers from the Haslet Volunteer Fire Department EMS were spending the night at the station after working late on a fundraiser. They arrived on scene at 3:07 a.m. The PHI crew was there 12 minutes later, and Richardson was on the way to the hospital within minutes. He had bled out by the time he reached the hospital and was rushed into surgery. Besides losing his legs, he had a sliced intestine and bruised heart. He woke up after 21 days in a coma and spent 55

more days in the hospital. He was back to work as an oil field consultant five months later and is now driving again.

"My trauma surgeon told me that 100 percent of the people who come in in my condition do not make it. These guys are true heroes, every single one of them. I owe my life to them," he says.

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Christopher Richardson, center, thanked the responders who saved his life after a horrific motorcycle crash. Richardson thanked each responder during Haslet Volunteer Fire Department's awards banquet held late last year. Back row, from left, Tommy Richardson, Richardson's father; Glenn Storey, HVFD; Nicholas Brenz, EMT, HVFD; Paul Michener, EMT-P, MedStar; Allen Cunningham, HVFD; Steve Stone, BNSF Police, who made 9-1-1 call; Mike Thetford, EMT-I, chief, HVFD; and Dan White, EMT-P, PHI. Front row, Rae Wilson, Richardson's mother; Kylie, Richardson's daughter; Eric Camejo, HVFD; Steven Fisackerly, HVFD; Nathan Abel, EMT, HVFD; Richardson; Lee Godbold, EMT, HVFD; and Kevin Kime, HVFD. Responders not pictured are Gregory Holbrook, HVFD; and James Oldengarm, EMT-P, Medstar; Jarrett Wharton, RN, PHI; and Pilot Scott Kimball, PHI. Photo: Kirt Mayes

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Jacob Brochtrup

Date: July 1, 2005

Responding: Austin-Travis County EMS, STARFlight

A flight medic later told Jacob Brochtrup that he looked like a goner when they saw him from the air. He doesn't remember what happened that summer day on Lake Travis. Brochtrup, who was 18 at the time, had been on a friend's boat when he went over the side and got his leg tangled in the moving propeller. The force severed his leg except for a bit of nerve tissue. While his friends frantically called for help, someone on a neighboring boat boarded and used a ski rope to make a tourniquet. By the time the boat Brochtrup was on had been towed to shore, he had nearly bled out. A bystander took over CPR until paramedics arrived. A few minutes later STARFlight came and took him to University Medical Center at Brackenridge, a Level II trauma facility. Surgeons eventually had to amputate Brochtrup's leg at the hip. But he did survive, and is now taking college courses in Austin. And he's grateful to those who responded.

"Every one of those guys is my hero. Not just the ones who worked on me but everybody who does that," he says.

Texas EMS/Trauma System

Date: 1989-Present

Sometimes making a difference goes global. Soldiers wounded in Iraq have trauma care roots right here in Texas. Several years ago, OEMS/TS asked whether military facilities could voluntarily be designated as trauma facilities; and if they were designated, would they be

allowed to share the state monies? The answer to both questions was yes. Four military facilities became designated: Wilford Hall Medical Center was designated first, followed by Brooke Army Medical Center, both in San Antonio; Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center at Fort Hood; and William Beaumont Army Medical Center in El Paso. All four facilities participate in the Texas EMS/Trauma System, taking care of military and civilian trauma in their areas. Assistant Commissioner Kathy Perkins says it's a win-win situation.

"By taking care of civilian trauma



"I feel like we've made a difference in the care of soldiers a different way, and I'm very proud of that."

Kathy Perkins, assistant commissioner of DSHS' Division of Regulatory Services, was given a flag quilt by the trauma coordinators from the four military hospitals in Texas designated as trauma facilities. Concepts from the Texas EMS/Trauma System are being used to improve trauma treatment in Iraq and Afghanistan. Photo: Dean Lofton

here, they are able to train nurses and physicians who will ultimately take care of our soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq,” she says. “Not only has the partnership between Texas and military facilities helped our system, it has been instrumental in establishing new roles for active military nurses to function as trauma nurse coordinators ‘in theater’ and to assist in education and training for the battlefield.”

To honor the partnership between DSHS and the military facilities, active duty members that functioned as trauma nurse coordinators and the civilian trauma nurse coordinators who work in military facilities presented Perkins with a flag quilt to symbolize her contributions to the Texas EMS/Trauma System at the March meeting of the Texas Trauma

Coordinators Forum.

“Because of Kathy Perkins passion and commitment to trauma in the State of Texas and her mentoring to trauma coordinators in Texas, she can be proud to say that the impact she has made in Texas is now global,” says Rose Bolenbaucher, Joint Theater Trauma System trauma nurse coordinator at the Institute of Surgical Research. “The present civilian trauma coordinators that work in military facilities have had a positive influence via Kathy Perkins and now they in turn

are carrying out the mission set forth to new trauma coordinators ‘in theater’.”

The gift of the quilt meant a great deal to Perkins, a veteran who expected to be career army nurse. When that path did not open up, she came to work at DSHS, never again expecting to have an impact on the care of soldiers.

“Maybe I would have made a difference in the care of soldiers if I’d stayed in the Army,” Perkins says, “but I feel like I’ve made a difference in the care of soldiers in a different way, and I’m very proud of that.”

EMS Hall of Fame

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to serve as the city’s first EMS medical director. Martin saw the need for continual improvement in patient care, and worked to develop LifeFlight and other EMS programs around the state. Moore says Martin was particularly proud of the work he did with NASA on a telemetry system developed for astronauts that could be used in ambulances.

“He loved taking technology and putting it on the streets,” Moore says.

Martin continued to direct EMS operations until 1985 and then transferred to oversee operations for the Houston Office of Emergency Management. He retired in 1988 with 39 years of service. He was inducted into the Texas EMS Hall of Fame in 1991 for his leadership in EMS. After retirement, Martin continued to help modernize EMS across Texas as a consultant and served as an advisor for planning statewide systems in Arkansas and Missouri.

Martin is survived by his wife of 55 years, Doris, and three children and their families: Suzanne Moore, Steven Martin and Philip Martin, an EMT and firefighter in Houston.



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