

The EMS Experience

Saluting those with 20 years or more in EMS

David Chreene, Air Operations Manager



David Chreene at a LifeNet EMS event in 2009 with his daughter, Maggie.

What was your first day on the job in EMS?

I was 18 years old, just out of EMT school. I had completed my hours with the field-training officer and had been cleared to work solo. It was my first day to be the one in charge. (We didn't have paramedics on ambulances back then.) I was

so nervous. I remember going through scenarios in my head of what to do and how to react. And then it happened. A call came in, my medic unit number was called. Would it be trauma, maybe a heart attack? Nope, it was a nursing home patient with a decreased level of consciousness. I soon realized

that most of the patients at nursing homes have a decreased level of consciousness . . . as well as some of the staff! The patient was a little old lady balled up in the fetal position, and from the looks of it had been that way for some time. I go through the drill, ask all the questions and get all the paperwork. Then I checked her blood pressure and it was 82/P. My adrenaline started pumping. We were taught in school that BP lower than 90 wasn't a good thing. My mind raced. What do I need to do? I had to do something! So what did I decide my plan of action would be? . . . You guessed it. MAST trousers! My partner laughed so hard he cried when he saw me trying to put those things on the little retracted-up patient. It was like trying to dress a turtle. Needless to say, I figured out real quick that the book didn't cover everything!

Which services have you worked for over the years?

I have worked for nearly every type of service you could possibly think of. I started with a private ambulance service, did my time at a fire department, public ambulance district, industrial and hospital settings, and aeromedical. I currently work as a flight paramedic and air operations manager for LifeNet EMS out of Texarkana.

Why did you get into EMS?

When I was a young lad, my dad started a fire district in northern Louisiana. I would go on the calls with him because it was cool! It was my job to hold the light still on the dash as we raced to the scene. In other words, I was important, if only in my mind. I was eager to learn and took every course I could. I was actually certified as a first responder at the ripe old age of 14. During high school I had an agreement with the principal: If I kept my grades up, I could leave from school whenever a call came in. Talk about respect. Everyone knew I was on the fire department and were kind of envious of me because I was allowed to do things that were way out of the norm for someone my age. From that point on, it was in my blood, and even to this day, I wouldn't want to do anything else. I truly love my job and honestly care for the patients I treat.

How has the field changed since you've been in it?

There are so many things that I've seen come and go since I started in 1984. If I had to put it into one word I would have to say *technology*. The first ambulance I worked out of was a high-top Suburban. Soon after, the Type II vans came into favor—they had 460-cubic-inch police interceptor supercharger engines! The only “governor” these big-block beasts had was the floor board! Fast was an understatement, but cooling was a problem for those monsters. It was not uncommon, but rather the norm, to drive past an accident scene and see all the hoods on



Chreene, in the blue jumpsuit, assists a patient as a volunteer for Caddo Fire District #5, circa 1987.

the emergency vehicles up, trying to keep them from overheating. Hood scoops weren't for looks, but actually functioned. Emergency lights were all seal-beam bulbs with electric motors used to rotate them. The high idle had to be engaged on scene or the batteries on the truck would die and the rig would have to be towed back to the station. Cardiac monitors were simple to use. The printer actually “burned” the image onto a strip of EKG paper. A heated stylette was used to discolor the paper, thus creating a tracing. You always knew when you had a paper jam because of the smoke. Spine boards were made of wood, the KED was unheard of, gloves were for wimps and cars were made of *real* metal. When you were dispatched to a major accident, that's exactly what you found when you got there.

Is there a particular moment or call that stands out?

Actually my first call as a first responder was a cardiac arrest . . . my uncle! He lived behind us. I remember getting there to find my dad in tears kneeling

over his brother. I instantly started CPR. Despite my best efforts, he was pronounced later at the hospital. My second call wasn't much better. It was a few days later at my uncle's funeral. My dad had a massive hemorrhagic stroke. I again sprang into action and did what I was trained to do. Despite having some right-side deficits, he survived to later have two heart attacks and another stroke (lucky guy). I was there for all of them. He brought me into this world and, as ironic as it may seem, I kept him in it. I consider us even!

What has been your favorite part of your career in EMS?

Every day I get to go do something that may hugely impact someone else's life. I know everyone says it, but it's true: we are underpaid, overworked, not recognized as well as fire and police departments on the national scene, but I still wouldn't trade it for anything. I love my job. My wife and kids are supportive and understanding. What more could any man ask for . . . well, besides winning the lottery!