

“I can’t thank them enough.”

How many professionals can say they make a positive difference every day? Emergency health care providers can, every time they lace up their shoes and go to work. The stories below are just a few of the thousands of EMS calls and emergency room visits that happen every day across the state. In honor of Texas EMS Week, Trauma Awareness Month and Stroke Awareness Month, we salute those who make a difference.

Christopher Santana

Date: November 23, 2007

First responders: Utopia Volunteer EMS and San Antonio AirLife

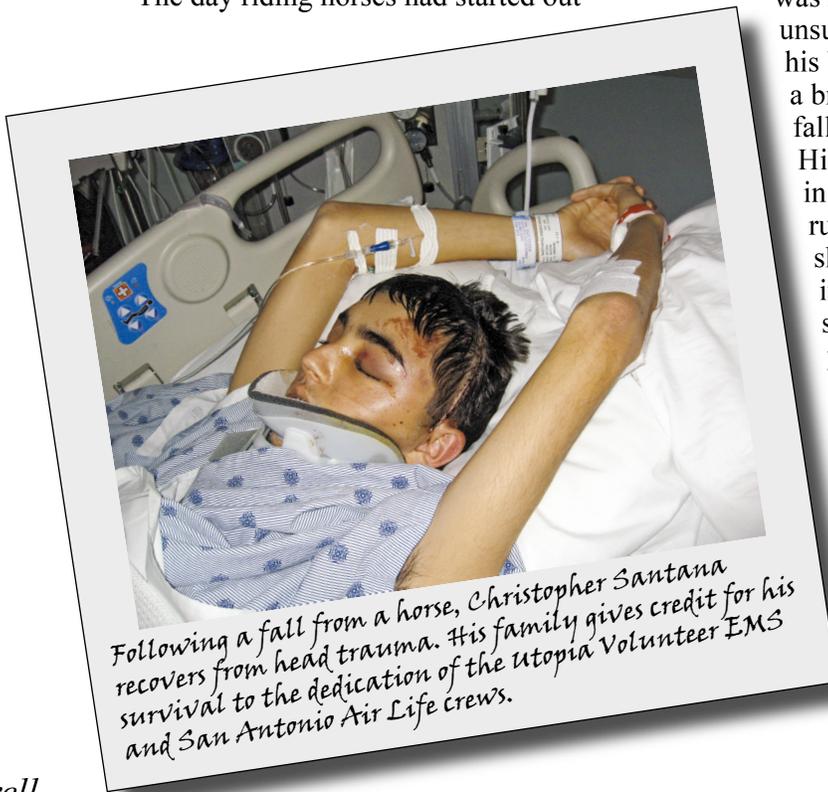
When Carolyn Jenkins first looked at her injured son, Chris, she prepared herself for the worst. Keep it together, she told herself, you’re about to watch him die.

The day riding horses had started out

well. The Jenkins extended family made an annual trip to Utopia each year the week of Thanksgiving, and as usual, they had taken a trail ride. Though Christopher, then 17, had been born with cerebral palsy and had been diagnosed with mild retardation and autism, he had experience riding horses. But when another horse took off for the stable, Chris’s horse followed. Even though Carolyn was riding behind Chris, she is still unsure whether Chris simply lost his balance or was knocked off by a branch. Jenkins watched her son fall and get dragged along the rocky Hill Country trail, his foot caught in a stirrup as the horse continued running toward the stable. When she reached him, she saw that indentions covered his skull, some as deep as an inch. She yelled for someone to call 9-1-1.

“He was trying to push himself up and blood was going everywhere. He was obviously in a state where he was going to degrade very quickly,” Jenkins says. “The huge indentation on his forehead was starting to swell.”

Utopia Volunteer EMS arrived and quickly did an assessment, made



Following a fall from a horse, Christopher Santana recovers from head trauma. His family gives credit for his survival to the dedication of the Utopia Volunteer EMS and San Antonio Air Life crews.

by Kelly Harrell

more difficult because of Chris' normal communication issues. Although he can hear, Chris had used sign language until he was seven years old.

"I know it's their job, but they were so good about listening to me when I told them they couldn't do an assessment based on a normal 17-year-old," Jenkins says. "The crew was so wonderful."

With Jenkins's help, the crew was able to figure out what was going on. Utopia medics called for San Antonio AirLife and made a phone call to medical director Ann Burgardt, MD, to make sure they were doing everything they could in the field. Crews quickly packaged Chris and took him to meet the helicopter. Chris was flown to San Antonio, where doctors told the Jenkins that given the severity of Chris's injuries, he might not live. But Chris had faced seemingly insurmountable challenges since he was a baby and he proved the doctors wrong once again. A week later, the family drove Chris home to Houston. He still faced physical and occupation therapy, and he later fought an infection in some transplanted bone, but today he's back to his old self. Last year, the Jenkinses met with Utopia VEMS medics to say thanks, introduce them to Christopher and to make a \$1000 donation.

"We absolutely know that without them, Christopher would not have lived. Then I found out they're all volunteers," Jenkins says. "I cannot as a parent thank them enough for what they give up so someone like me doesn't have to give up her son."

Rob Hunley

Date: November 10, 2009

First responders: Helotes Fire Department/EMS and San Antonio AirLife

The first day of his vacation didn't go exactly as Rob Hunley had planned. The Helotes assistant police chief had just finished some yard work outside his home when he felt a familiar tightening in his chest.

He'd suffered a heart attack a couple of years earlier that required a stent and had been on medication since. Anytime he felt a twinge, he took two aspirin and the pain disappeared – problem solved. This time, the usual remedy didn't work, maybe because he'd quit taking his cardiac medication a few months earlier.

"Once a month my arms would hurt but then I would be fine," Hunley says. "Those times I ignored (my body's) warning signs."

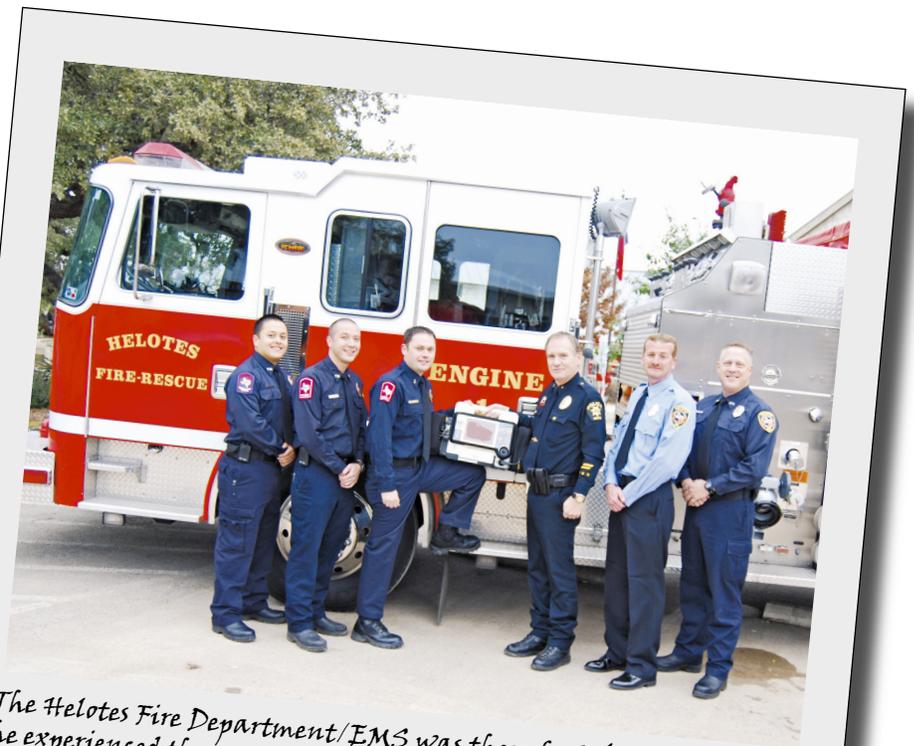
When he began shaking so hard that he couldn't keep water in a cup, Hunley called an off-duty paramedic, Keith Eldard, who advised Hunley to meet him at the fire station to get checked out. On the three minute drive to the station, Hunley experienced pain unlike any he had felt before.

"I didn't know what was wrong, but I knew I was in pretty big trouble," he says.

When he finally sat down in the fire station, he immediately slumped over.

"I didn't have time to say anything. I knew I was dying, but I couldn't do anything," he says.

The first shock brought Hunley back



The Helotes Fire Department/EMS was there for Rob Hunley when he experienced the symptoms of his second heart attack. Hunley, an assistant police chief, knows what he's talking about when he compliments the EMS personnel: "The crews did everything perfect, everything they should have done."

and he woke up to Eldard yelling his name and telling him to hang in there. Hunley remembers being annoyed at the yelling – and angry when he realized he wasn't going home. Hunley's condition was serious enough that San Antonio AirLife had been called. Medics told him he tried to stand up and shake it off before passing out again. By the time San Antonio AirLife delivered him to the hospital, he'd been defibrillated 12 times, including one synchronized cardioversion. His physician told him that there was only a one percent chance that someone with his blockage would make it. Hunley credits the care at the hospital for clearing the blockage, but says a lot of the credit also goes to the medics from Helotes and AirLife who refused to give up.

"They could have easily stopped but they didn't. Our guys don't quit, won't quit until

scuba driving trip with the Boy Scouts.

The Townzens were preparing to host a party last July when Conn felt a twinge in his chest after working in the yard. He did the natural thing – he denied that it was happening and told himself he just needed to take a shower.

"That was number two for me so I had a pretty good idea of what was going on, but I was in denial most of the event," Conn says.

Conn collapsed as he got out of the shower and that's where Debbie found him. She called 9-1-1.

"He was in pain and having difficulty talking, and was sweaty but cool," Debbie says. "We got some nitro and aspirin down him, then handed him some underwear and helped him lay on the bed."

Conn says the pain was unlike any he'd ever had – and it was scary.

“I didn't know what was wrong, but I knew I was in pretty big trouble.”

the very end," Hunley says. "The crews did everything perfect, everything they should have done." And he's learned to slow down and enjoy life a bit more.

"I got to have Thanksgiving and Christmas with my family. A lot of things I got to do because of those guys," Hunley says. "Now I take drives, look at the grass, see the trees. I don't even mind doing the dishes anymore. My wife likes that."

Conn Townzen

Date: July 18, 2009

First responders: Montgomery County Hospital District (MCHD) EMS and Magnolia Volunteer Fire Department

Debbie Townzen knew what the doctor had told her husband of 17 years when he'd had a heart attack at age 44: If Conn didn't change his habits, he'd have another one in five years. Still, his last stress test had been normal for the last several years, so her husband postponed one to take their son on a

"On a ten scale, this was a 12, and it was intensified because it was strange and different. There was nothing I could do to lessen it," he says.

A few minutes later, medics were perplexed when they hooked him up to a monitor and it showed no signs of impending cardiac arrest. But even as the paramedics peppered Debbie with questions about heat stress, Debbie knew what was happening to her husband – even if it wasn't registering yet on the cardiac monitor. But Debbie didn't know that. All she knew was that the doctor's prediction was coming true. And she was frustrated.

"They knew something was very bad wrong, but it was not showing on their monitors. I was barking orders at these professionals – I wouldn't say I was a whole lot of help," she says wryly.

Then Conn's eyes rolled back, his chest lifted off the bed and he gripped the covers. The monitors finally registered what Conn's surgeons would later call



Conn Townzen, in the foreground, suffered his second heart attack in July 2009. The photo collage by Paul Gould, Jr., depicts Townzen's experience. David Pairett, in the background, was the lead paramedic on the call; in the smaller inset are EMT-I John Hancock and Paramedic Lee Gillum.

he felt peaceful and calm. Conn says he met a man he believed to be Jesus, who told him that he couldn't stay, which disappointed him. "The next thing I know, people are yelling and my wife is going crazy. It's like being forced to wake up from a nap – you fight it for a few minutes."

Meanwhile, as the Townzen's oldest son prayed, his blood pressure skyrocketed, bursting the blood vessels in his nose. A second ambulance had to be dispatched. Medics defibrillated Conn and got a pulse back, then had to defibrillate again before they got to the hospital. Staff there administered a hypothermic treatment, which cooled his body down. Eight days after a massive heart attack, Conn was able to go back to work. And eight months later, his heart shows no signs of damage. But Conn looks at life a little differently now.

"If this has taught me anything, it's that you can drop dead of a heart attack any time,"

a "widowmaker" – a massive heart attack caused by a blockage in the artery, and nearly always fatal. Paramedics started resuscitation. Debbie left the room and started praying.

"I told the kids to pray for a miracle because their dad was dead," she says. "I called friends and told them to pray. I called friends and had little clusters of friends praying."

Conn doesn't remember anything. His mind took him to a beautiful field where

Conn says. "This expectation you're fretting over, or bills, it could all be over at the end of the day."

And the Townzens are both grateful for the care they received from MCHD EMS, Magnolia Volunteer Fire Department and the hospital.

"If they weren't there, I wouldn't be here," Conn says. "Nothing I could say is adequate."

Debbie agrees: "The whole thing was a miracle."

"If they weren't there, I wouldn't be here."