

Crash course

A horrific wreck happens on a rural road with no help nearby. Can a first responder and bystanders save this patient?

By Kelly Harrell

A curving road on a bright August afternoon. An EMT, just off shift at the fire station, happens upon a major collision moments after impact. After his brain processes the scene, something kicks in: instinct. Under all that metal, there might be patients. Check airway. Bleeding. Circulation.

Texas 80 slices through the rolling farmland as it leaves I-10, a blacktop ribbon taking drivers past miles of fencing punctuated occasionally by a small town. Every few days, Austin firefighter John Green makes the two-hour commute

from his station in Austin down this road, through Gonzales and Karnes counties, to his house in Nordheim. August 20th was a routine kind of day. Green got off work at noon and spent couple of hours in Austin buying tires for his truck before heading south.

In Luling, he noticed a large 18-wheeler in front of him and wondered if he'd be stuck behind that truck until he turned off. But the truck made a traffic light that held John back, so he enjoyed a clear stretch of road. As Green rounded a curve and came over a hill, he saw the truck again,

but something wasn't right. It was off the road to the left, sitting nearly jackknifed along a wire fence.

"I thought, 'What is that truck doing there? Did he hit a dog or something?'" Green says. "(Then) cars started coming into my lane and I knew it was a collision."

He saw what he thought was the driver of the truck crossing the highway. His eyes scanned a line from the rear of the trailer to the cab. It sat on top of a small car.

Department of Public Safety investigators say moments before,



John Green

Karnes County Volunteer Fire Department personnel work extrication on a major collision on Hwy. 80. The crash killed the driver and one passenger. Off-duty firefighter John Green and nurse Linda Haden extricated and began care on a 3-year-old in the back seat, who did survive.

a 27-year-old man driving a Honda Civic east on Texas 80 drifted into the westbound lane. The westbound 18-wheeler tried to move out of the way, but the Honda driver overcorrected and they collided. The impact sent both vehicles sliding sideways across the road and into the grass. The truck's cab came to rest on the hood of the car's hood.

Green, a veteran firefighter and EMT for more than 20 years, immediately used his radio to report the collision and pulled up even with the car. Green checked the truck driver, who was shaken up, but okay. The bystander, Linda Haden, introduced herself as a dialysis clinic nurse and asked what she could do to help.

"Good, you've seen blood," Green told her. A few more bystanders stood ready to help.

The group headed back across the highway to the Civic. The impact had partially peeled back the roof of the car and pushed the dashboard into the front passenger seat. The driver was dead, probably on impact. In the passenger seat, a taut seatbelt disappeared beneath the dashboard. He reached in as far as he could but couldn't find a pulse on the passenger. In the back seat, Green noticed a small child in a booster seat slumped forward, arms hanging straight down, her head pinned between the front driver's seat and post. Unable to get a carotid pulse, he searched for a brachial. He found one. Circulation. She moved involuntarily. He worked his hand under her chin and tilted her head up.

"When I did that she took a pretty good breath," Green says. "I was thinking, what's going to kill her now? We've got an airway, what's the next thing? Check for major bleeding. It's just algorithms."

Green did a sweep of the girl's

face. She was bleeding heavily from a scalp laceration, with a smaller laceration on her wrist. They needed to get her out, but the front seat and roof were in the way. Green saw it was going to be a complicated extrication. Everyone needed to understand what needed to happen, and how.

"Before we did anything, I briefed all the parties on what their positions were and duties. No one had to read my mind and guess what my next move was," Green says. Because only he and Haden had medical training, he made sure he avoided any terminology that might not be understood by the untrained bystanders.

"I tried to keep all the communications in the simplest terms," Green says.

While Haden held the girl's head, Green used it to push apart the roof and the seat with the Hi-Lift jack bystanders had fetched from Green's pickup. Green and Haden unwedged the girl. When they sat her up in the booster seat, they saw she had bilateral femur fractures.

"We knew her femurs were gone so we tried to immobilize her hips and lower extremities as much as possible," Green says.

Even after using the jack, Green realized the crumpled roof would prevent extrication through the side door. The only option was the back window, which had shattered on impact. While Haden held the girl in upright position, Green climbed over the trunk and cut through the seatbelt on the booster seat. The trick now was to get her out without any more damage.

"I put her hands above her head and held down her sides for c-spine (stabilization). Her femurs were already damaged, so the biggest concern was her pelvis. I

got in position behind her then had (bystanders) pull me straight out by my legs," Green says.

Holding the girl steady, they brought her over to the tarp the bystanders had laid out beside Green's truck. He continued to monitor her pulses while they put her on a BVM. Karnes County VFD arrived, popped open the passenger door and found a child in the passenger seat of the Honda. Green checked him. He had extensive facial and chest trauma, and it appeared that he had died on impact, crushed by the dashboard.

Green had gone back to work on the girl when Karnes County EMS arrived. They used a pedi board from EMS and got her packaged before San Antonio AirLife landed. The sound of the chopper blades was welcome.

"(Airlife was) fantastic. They showed up and said 'What do you have and what do you need?' They became part of the rescue," Green says.

On the way home, his pants solidly red from the cut he had gotten on his elbow, Green went over the events in his mind. Could anything else have been done?

The trauma system had been activated. Bystanders were there to help, one with medical training. And he had told bystanders about their roles and the sequence of events, so they knew what to do. First responders arrived with needed equipment. A chopper with advanced life support came in a fraction of time it would have taken an ALS ambulance to find the rural location. And he, a veteran first responder, had arrived on the scene just moments after the crash. Many things *did* go right.

Airway. Bleeding. Circulation. A little girl lives.