

On Call by Choice: Life Stories of Houston EMS

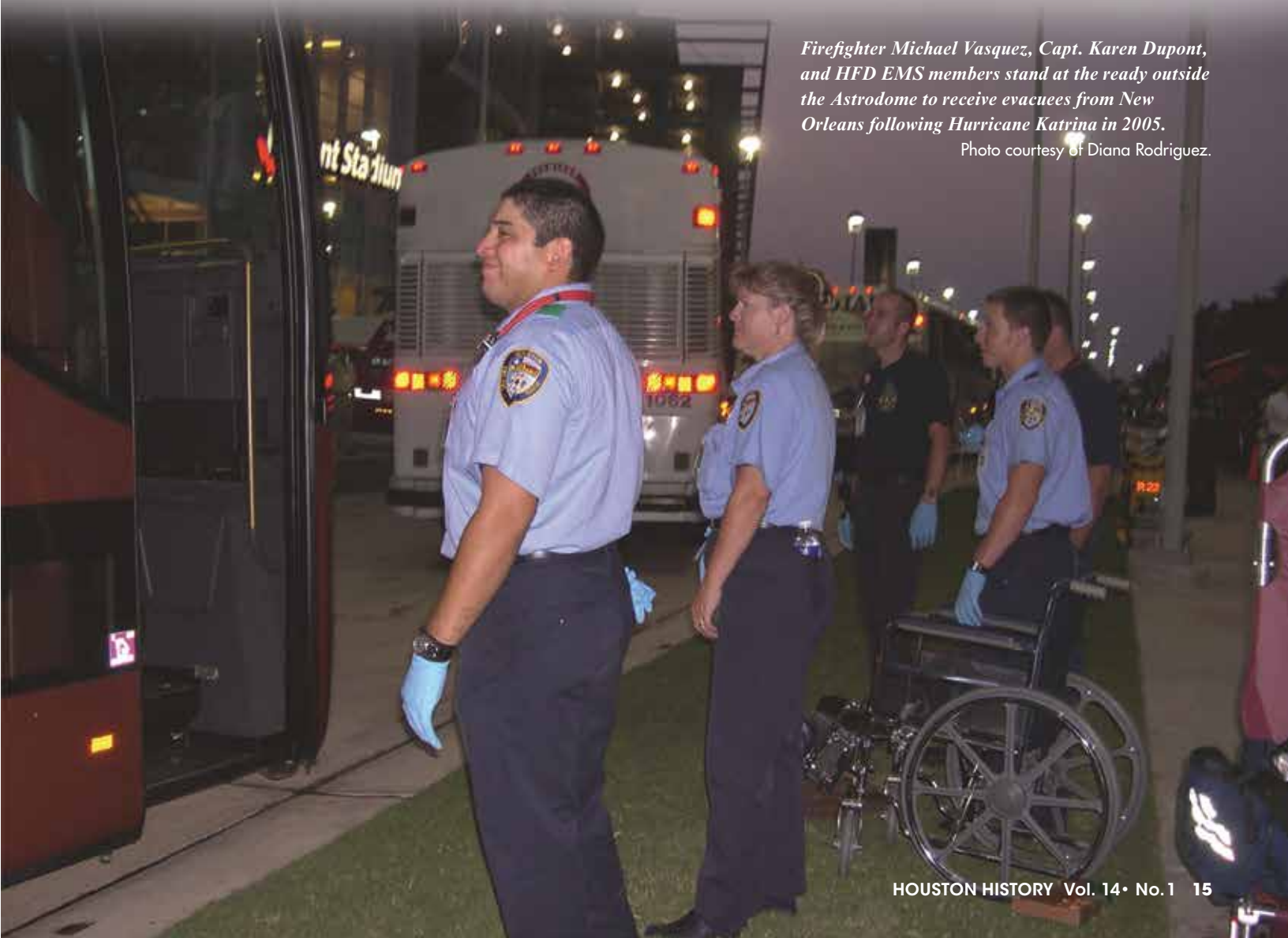
By La’Nora Jefferson

The Houston Fire Department Emergency Medical Services (HFD EMS) has pioneered emergency medical protocols, leading the way for departments across the country, but behind the history are the individuals who stand ready every day of the year to help Houstonians, no matter what their emergency or what time of the day or night. Rodney West, who became the interim Fire Chief in 2016, emphasizes, “The greatest resource of the Houston Fire Department are the people who work here. We have amazing people and a lot of them came for the same reason I did, because they wanted to help people.”¹

Few of us outside the profession can truly comprehend the nature of the heroic work — our term, not theirs — that EMTs and paramedics perform on a daily basis. The Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative began recording oral histories with a group of HFD EMTs, paramedics, retirees, and department leaders in February 2016 to preserve the previously undocumented history of Houston EMS. Some accounts were heart wrenching, some comical, and others were stories of affirmation, but all were told with humility and gratitude for having had the chance to make a difference in even one person’s life.

Firefighter Michael Vasquez, Capt. Karen Dupont, and HFD EMS members stand at the ready outside the Astrodome to receive evacuees from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Photo courtesy of Diana Rodriguez.



Being an EMT or paramedic has never been a regular eight-to-five job, and emergencies do not always occur during normal business hours. During HFD's early years the firefighters' schedule was 72 hours a week with a two shift system. In 1962 city leaders reduced their hours to 56 hours a week with a three shift system. In the late 1970s the division of responsibilities between firefighters and EMTs created a heavier workload for EMTs and paramedics, who frequently took three to five times as many calls, answering them back-to-back every other hour on average during a fourteen-hour shift while firefighters averaged two during the same period, leaving them time to relax and study for promotional exams. During this era, the city's rapid growth from annexation, the turnover rate of appointed fire chiefs, and the high volume of non-emergency calls made it difficult to moderate the work load, which grew from 46,000 calls in 1972 to approximately 60,000 in 1979. By 1991 firefighters, who were all trained at least as basic EMTs, shared responsibility for EMS calls, working 46.7 hours a week in four shifts, a schedule still in use today.²

Houston EMTs and paramedics spend a significant amount of time at their assigned stations, often more time than they spend at home. Thus, stations function as living quarters for EMTs and paramedics. Retired paramedic and Senior Captain Tom McDonald recalls that the first station where he worked in the 1980s "had a common dormitory." Only the captain had his own room. "Everybody else slept in another room, including the paramedics ... [who were] in a little corner with a little barricade and a red light that stayed on all night."³

Stations serve as a home away from home. Just like any family, they cook together, watch television, play games, exercise, and discuss sports or the trending topics of the day. They also show respect for each other's privacy and give space when desired. Retired firefighter and EMT Glen Morris explains that some people simply use time between

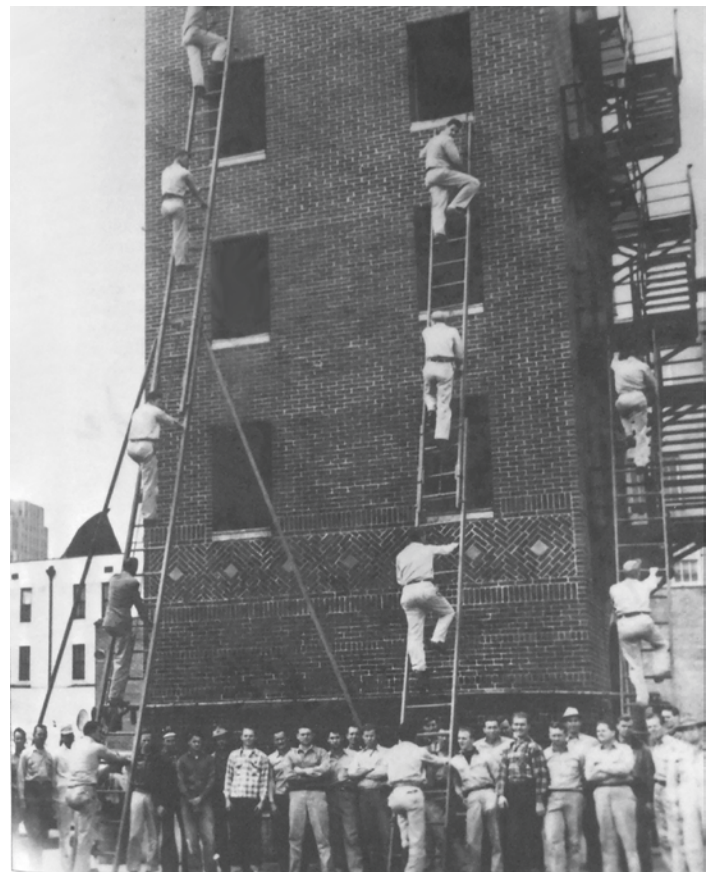
Several people involved during the early days of EMS assembled in front of City Hall to celebrate the program's fortieth anniversary. Front row left to right are Senior Dispatcher Charlie Hall, Chief Whitey Martin's son HFD member Phillip Martin, Chief Martin's widow Doris Taylor Martin, and Bill Hausinger, dispatcher for the first HFD EMS call. Standing in back are Glen Morris, center, and Otis Owens, right, who answered the first call.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Fire Department.



calls to relax, while others study for promotions or even use the time to finish school work.⁴

Every person in HFD EMS has unique stories to tell, from why they joined HFD to the many experiences they have had on the job, but they also share a common bond that unites them across the decades. For example, Bill Hausinger, Glen Morris, and Otis Owens were brought together when they answered Houston's first EMS call. Hausinger was destined to be a firefighter, following in his father and uncle's footsteps, who both served HFD for more than forty years. Hausinger went to his first fire at age five when he was visiting his father and fell asleep on the seat of the pumper, which was called into service. At age twenty, he joined HFD. Morris became interested in HFD when he saw a man jump out of the window of a downtown building and learned from a firefighter on the scene that they were in training. When Morris, a Navy veteran, discovered that HFD was hiring veterans, he joined the academy in 1968. Owens, on the other hand, remembers as a child that his uncle's house burned down, and he never believed that it was an accident. Nicknamed "Sherlock," Otis was always curious about fires. Responding to an HFD television ad attracting new firefighters with the promise to pay their tuition, he joined the department. After serving as a paramedic, Owens became a fire investigator for seventeen years, living up to his nickname. Morris and Owens were among the first to volunteer to be EMTs and in the first group of African Americans in HFD promoted to the rank of Chauffeur, now Engineer Operator.⁵



Seeing men jump off this five-story drill tower (shown circa 1950) at the corner of Preston and Austin Streets motivated Glen Morris to inquire about joining the department.



A train carrying vinyl chloride and butadiene derailed causing this 1971 fire on Mykawa Road at Almeda Genoa. A subsequent explosion (boiling liquid vapor explosion or BLEVE) killed one firefighter and injured many of those present, some severely. It also separated HFD member Richard Sadler Jr. from his son and son-in-law, also firefighters, leaving him in despair until he learned they were safe. The fire resulted in formation of the HFD Haz Mat team.

Photo by Othell O. Owensby courtesy of the Houston Fire Department.

Hausinger later dispatched Morris and Owens from Station 19 to respond to the city's first EMS call on April 10, 1971, at 12:30 a.m. to assist a woman in labor. The two men recall everyone trying to relax as the new EMS service went into effect at midnight, and even though they did not want to receive the first call, they knew they were well-trained and ready to deliver medical services if needed.⁶

That call was one of many answered by Hausinger, Morris, and Owens throughout their careers. Morris recalls once responding to a shooting at a wedding, where the guests insisted that EMS take the victim to the hospital even though the HFD members had pronounced him dead. Since they refused, some wedding guests put the man on a stretcher, forced the driver out of the ambulance, put the EMT in the back of the unit, and drove the man to the hospital with the sirens on. Morris and Owens, who served together for several years at Station 19, especially remember "Sweet Cake," a neighborhood character who called at least fifty times and went to the hospital so often that the staff recognized him. One time when he saw an ambulance coming, Sweet Cake fell out in front of the unit to be taken to the hospital. Owens and Morris often went out of their way to help people with non-emergencies, including giving them cab money to get to a doctor or hospital.⁷

Another man who frequently made non-emergency calls was "10 Speed." He often called to say he had chest pains and then laid down by the phone booth where he placed the call so that he could visit his sister in the hospital. Because

he called during different shifts with different firefighters on duty, the staff at Station 24, which responded, did not initially realize what he was doing. Hausinger also recalls an elderly lady who asked the department to bring a hose. When he asked her why, she explained that two dogs were stuck together and she thought the fire hose would help. Otis sums up their experiences with a warm smile, saying they "saw it all."⁸

Of course not all of the stories are amusing anecdotes, especially when EMS members' families are involved. Hausinger remembers when his son fell twenty feet down an elevator shaft and landed on an electrical box while doing construction work. Worried, Bill called dispatch, and they reassured him that the injury was a code one, meaning his son did not have major injuries. He updated his wife and daughter-in-law, but after speaking with them began to wonder if his fellow firefighters had lied to prevent him worrying. He added, "You're not gonna tell your own people how bad it is ... but we all know how bad it could be." After arriving at the hospital, his son came to him and said, "I'm okay, Daddy," with only a cut under his arm and a few missing teeth. Retelling the story still brings tears to Hausinger's eyes.⁹

At the urging of a family friend, Chief Dunn, Richard Sadler Jr. entered the fire department in 1950, beginning a legacy that his son, son-in-law, and grandson followed. When the ambulance program began, Chief C. R. "Jake" Cook insisted Sadler join. Reluctant at first, he now beams

when discussing the positive impact it had on his life. Sadler participated in one of the first EMT training classes and later the first paramedic class with his son Richard Sadler III. He shared a heart wrenching story about a time when he thought his son and son-in-law had lost their lives. They all responded to a rail car fire on October 19, 1971, on Mykawa Road, where two cars, one carrying vinyl chloride and the other butadiene, exploded. The burning cars separated Sadler from his family while he waited, praying and cursing, for what seemed an eternity to get to the other side. In that moment he made a promise to God, which he still keeps, because after crossing the track he saw the victim wore a Catholic medal and then knew his family, all Methodists, were safe. Truxton Joseph Hathaway Jr. sadly perished.¹⁰

Retired paramedic and Senior Captain Frank Mettlach had ambitions of teaching music but later realized that was not for him. He followed his brother-in-law's suggestion to join the EMS program in Brownsville, where they lived, but moved to Houston to become a career paramedic. Pointing out that it is impossible to cover the hundreds of stories he remembers, he said one night was particularly memorable because he had three calls after midnight to perform CPR. When he arrived at the first call two men were down, and he went to aid one of them who had been shot and intubated him. The police officer on the scene soon realized the other man, who was "playing dead," was the shooter and arrested him. Mettlach reflects on how lucky he was in choosing the victim and not the gunman, saying "I could've been killed there." The second CPR call was to a club off Navigation Boulevard where the patrons had a man stretched out on top of the bar inside and were already administering CPR. The only thing Mettlach remembers of the third incident is being unable to revive the unresponsive victim. He points out, "You never know when those calls come up if you can make that difference," adding that having a public trained to administer CPR until help arrives can make a critical difference in survival.¹¹

While these incidents are memorable, others have a far deeper impact personally. Mettlach also discusses a woman in the process of moving to Houston when a group of men sexually assaulted and stabbed her, before stealing her belongings from her U-Haul and leaving her in a field.



Frank Mettlach surveys the situation at a 1991 auto accident.
Photo courtesy of Frank Mettlach.



Then Paramedic David Almaguer waits to get released after being involved in an ambulance accident, circa 1993.

Photo courtesy of David Almaguer.

Mettlach arrived on the scene at around three or four o'clock in the morning and found her severely injured. The woman asked, "Am I gonna die?" He answered, "No, I don't think so because you're still alive right now." Even though he was not sure she would live, he wanted to comfort and calm her, telling her what to expect once she arrived at Ben Taub Hospital. She sustained a tension pneumothorax, a head injury, and other wounds, but still survived. She later did her own reenactment and police caught her assailants, who were sentenced to life in prison. Mettlach continues to be impressed by her bravery.¹²

Reflecting on his time as a paramedic, Mettlach says, "I put my whole life into this ... It doesn't define who I am but it defines what I do and my strong feelings about treating



Pat Kasper, at left, was called the paramedic's paramedic because he taught others the value of treating patients the way one would want their family members treated. He is joined by Richard Mann, now an Executive Assistant Chief.

Photo courtesy of David Almaguer.

people right... Sometimes I was really tired, I was grouchy and I didn't do the right things, but for the most part I [did]."¹³

Assistant Chief for Houston EMS David Almaguer planned to become a ship's captain, but while attending Texas A&M University he was on the emergency care team and worked a summer job in the cardiac intensive care unit at Methodist Hospital with Dr. Michael DeBakey, who was instrumental in starting Houston's ambulance program. While Almaguer joined HFD to pay for college tuition, he eventually joined the paramedic program because they needed more people. He says he will always remember the first call he made with paramedic Pat Kasper, identified as "the paramedic's paramedic." They tended an elderly woman with the flu and viewed her illness as minor, but she felt apprehensive because it was the sickest she had ever been. Almaguer remembers that Kasper taught him how to care for people even when he did not view their situation as an emergency and helped him to realize, "[The] caring part was more important than the IV or the oxygen I gave her. All those things helped ... but what she really needed was just somebody to say, 'You're going to be okay, somebody is going to take care of you.'"¹⁴

This caring approach came down from Assistant Chief Dennis Holder, who served the department from 1957-1995. Today it is listed as the first guideline in the department's "Patient Care Guidelines and Standing Orders," issued by Dr. David Persse, HFD EMS Physician Director and Public Health Authority for the City of Houston. Called the "Holder Rule" and posted in the EMS offices, it directs personnel: "Treat patients and their families as if they are a member of your own family. (1) Consider that if this was your brother, mother, daughter, grandfather; what care you would want for them if you were not present; (2) Provide compassion, caring, friendly demeanor and reassuring tone/ words; (3) If tensions exist, strive to defuse them or find others (e.g. a supervisor) who can help; (4) Treat on-lookers and even interveners with respect; (5) Keep in mind that, as a firefighter, you provide a public service. Often, the greatest asset provided to the citizens you serve is your reassurance and caring."¹⁵

Dr. Persse began working as assistant physician director of Houston EMS in 1993 under Dr. Paul Pepe, Houston's first physician director. Persse briefly left Houston to serve as physician director of Los Angeles County Paramedic Training Institute and physician director of the Los Angeles County EMS before succeeding Pepe in 1996. Persse has been involved in many incidents in the field, including saving patients on the streets of downtown Houston and even once while he took a little time off to play hockey. One of the most noted events for the department, however, was aiding Hurricane Katrina evacuees arriving in Houston in 2005. He witnessed women, children, babies and even "young, strong, men" getting off of the buses in bad condition. While helping to care for Houston's "guest citizens," Persse sometimes slept at the Houston Emergency Center, going about three weeks without sleeping at home. He recalled walking onto the Dome floor the first time and seeing the sea of people, but "it wasn't loud—nobody was yelling. . . it was just all of these people laid out on cots with what-

ever belongings they had left to them piled beside them, and families trying to group together and searching for other family members."¹⁶ It was a deeply moving experience.

Diana Rodriguez, who is the administrative coordinator to Dr. Persse, had many notable experiences helping people arriving at the Astrodome who were covered in mud and embarrassed because they had not had a shower. She observed, "Their pride, everything was just right there — raw—and they were apologizing to *you*." People outside of EMS and the relief effort who heard the negative stories in the media would say to her, "Oh my God, you were dealing with those Katrina people." But she never had a negative experience, explaining, "Most of the people were full of gratitude. Some even managed to smile," especially after learning she was with HFD.¹⁷

A member of the Army Reserves and son of a minister, interim Fire Chief Rodney West learned about HFD's opportunities from a member of his church.

He was attracted to HFD, knowing he could excel and help people. He explains, "You're raised to help people and this was a way to get paid for something you liked doing anyway." In responding to emergencies, West explains, EMS personnel "experience the life of other people" because they go into patients' homes and neighborhoods, rather than seeing them in the sterile atmosphere of a hospital. "You actually go to their environment and see how they're living with the emergency. You often can identify socioeconomic conditions that lead to people calling EMS." Harris County has a high number of uninsured residents who do not go to a doctor regularly and cannot properly take care of themselves, so they call EMS when medical care is needed. That said, West adds that some of the hardest things for him to deal with on the job were seeing abused children and delivering sad news to family members.¹⁸

Emergency personnel risk their lives simply going to a call; once there, they may be exposed to disease or added dangers at highway accidents, hazardous material incidents, disasters, or crimes scenes. Yet in the history of Houston EMS, the department has lost only one member while responding to an EMS call. James Louis Walls died on May 3, 1971, less than a month after the program started, when a passenger car struck the ambulance he was driving while transporting a patient to the hospital.¹⁹

Although EMS personnel can reflect on times when they made a difference in someone's life, they also experience things they would rather not remember. "There are the [stories] that stay with you that you don't want to stay [with you]. Those are the ones that come around a lot," Chief Almaguer observes. Apart from the physical demands of



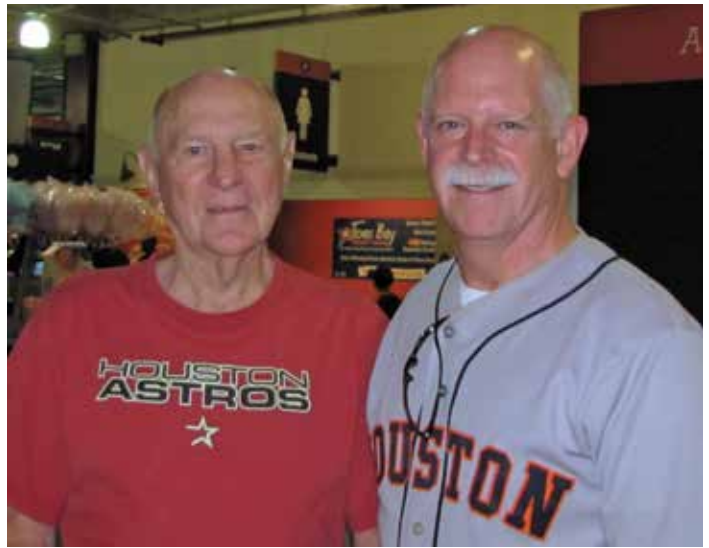
Named interim Fire Chief in 2016, Rodney West worked his way up through the ranks in the department, bringing a wealth of experiences to the job. Photo courtesy of Alicia Breaux.

getting in an ambulance in under two minutes and working twenty-four hour shifts with multiple runs, the emotional rigor of the job also takes a toll, from the trauma and loss of life one may witness to the pressure of making split-second life-and-death decisions.²⁰

The firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics cope with the physical and mental travail of their work in different ways. For example, Glen Morris played his guitar and says that many others played sports to clear their minds. Otis Owens read books but points out others studied or did electrical and carpentry repair work, saying the average firefighter had something he or she did on the side. Chief West stays optimistic by relying on his faith in God. He points out, “[My] dad was a pastor a long time, so [I know] a lot of things are not in my control,” adding “stress comes from feeling like you have to control certain things.” To cope with the demands of work, West practices what he calls “relational leadership,” based on creating relationships of understanding and trust between leaders and their coworkers.²¹

With firefighting perceived as “a macho profession,” West explains it can be problematic to admit one is struggling to handle the stress of the job. He was instrumental in obtaining a second staff psychologist for HFD, which also has a Critical Incident Stress Management Team (CISM) to offer support. HFD members receive help related to stresses from the job, the home, abuse, or the war front, as many in the department are war veterans. Firefighters have a high suicide rate because it becomes difficult to handle the bad experiences when they begin to reflect on them. Chief Almaguer, who is a member of the CISM team, points out that they focus on discussing traumatic experiences, which he says is the first step to dealing with them.²²

Frank Mettlach spoke candidly about his experiences with job stress, confessing, “I’ve been what they call ‘burned out’ three times. I had to get some therapy to get back on track.” He believes that “long term paramedics need some



Retired Junior Captain Richard Sadler with Dr. David Persse. Sadler called being a paramedic one of the best things that ever happened in his life.

Photo courtesy of Diana Rodriguez.

help. There’s so much they see and do and they get threatened. They see some things nobody should see. It’s like war a lot of times.” Nevertheless, he observes Houston EMS is “a good team” and adds, “[I] wouldn’t trade my life at EMS here for anything.”²³

At the end of the day, everyone helps each other. Almaguer points out, “One of the advantages of having EMS in the fire service, is you have that family that you can go to.” Like any family not everyone gets along perfectly, but when it counts they serve each other professionally and personally.²⁴

Despite the stress of the job, EMTs and paramedics report for work every day to serve the residents of Houston. The calls EMS responds to could be for a toothache or a baby who will not stop crying; it could be a shooting, anaphylactic shock, cardiac arrest, or a stroke when their actions save someone’s life. Why are so many willing to enter such a difficult profession? Frank Mettlach says of his experience, “You know, the adrenaline is there it’s... exciting and all, but why we really do it [is] to make a difference, and if you make a difference in five or six lives... isn’t that a goal in life?” Glen Morris reflects on his and Otis Owens’s experiences, saying, “It was worth it.” Otis adds, “It was tough but we enjoyed doing it... helping people, saved a lot of lives... a lot of lives.” Glen agrees, “That was the most rewarding thing, when someone said, ‘Y’all helped me when I needed it and I thank you for it.’”²⁵ A simple reward, but the only one needed.

Whatever the incident or how many lives they have saved, the people who work with Houston EMS do not think of themselves as heroes, just regular people trying to do the best job they can for others. And it is that humility that makes their daily sacrifices so meaningful.

La’Nora Jefferson graduated in August 2016 with a degree in history from the Honors College at the University of Houston, where she also interned at *Houston History*. Her dedication to completing the EMS project and this story in particular was invaluable.



Retired paramedic, Captain Frank Mettlach.