

Lives Saved — Heroes Made

By Diana J. Rodriguez

When someone calls 9-1-1 in Houston, Houston Fire Department (HFD) EMTs and paramedics respond quickly – and there is hope.

Dr. Paul Pepe, who became Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Director in 1983, realized how much it boosted the morale of HFD members to see a patient they previously resuscitated and hear them say, “thank you!” When Dr. David Persse took over as EMS Director in 1996, he took this a few steps further. As a result, several times a month, reunions take place between survivors (or “saves”), HFD rescuers, and all who assisted them in saving a life. In Houston, all cardiac arrests are tracked, as cardiac arrest survival is an internationally recognized indicator of EMS agency performance. The survivors of all emergencies are a testament to the training and dedication of HFD members to their craft of saving lives.

Some cardiac arrest survivors and their families insist on reuniting with HFD heroes who answered their 9-1-1 call. Many express how grateful they are to the 9-1-1 calltakers who calmed them down and helped them perform CPR (cardio pulmonary resuscitation), when moments before they were frantic. They say that the moment they heard the sirens outside their door, they felt relieved that the finest

pre-hospital care was at their disposal. They recount a loved one not breathing, without a pulse, and eight to twelve EMTs and paramedics working feverishly to resuscitate their child, parent, spouse, or friend.

For over a decade, HFD EMS Patient Liaison Patricia Hilliard has tracked survivors when they are discharged from the hospital to follow-up and offer them a reunion. Scheduling these events involves coordinating with multiple firefighters’ 24-hour shifts, the HFD physician on-call, bystanders, and the 9-1-1 calltakers. Often HFD members are pleasantly surprised to hear the critical patient they did not expect to live has survived.

With the logistics arranged, the patient and family members meet each other at a designated fire station. Dr. Persse usually emceeds the reunions and extends his appreciation to the survivor and family for coming to thank HFD. While reliving the worst day of their lives, patients and family members share lots of hugs and often tears of joy with their team of heroes. Each firefighter, calltaker or layperson who was a link in the Chain of Survival receives a printed commendation. Pictures are taken in front of the responding HFD apparatus and printed on the spot for each hero. The local media often covers these heartwarming reunions.

For HFD members these sincere thanks from the families are rare, yet one of the most important rewards they will ever receive for a job well-done.

Even when a person is unable to survive a life threatening emergency, some families request a reunion to extend their deepest gratitude to the HFD team that “put their hands on my loved one.” What they witnessed still comforts them as they recall with amazing detail, the actions of HFD members. As one relative explained, “Everyone was trying so hard, but we know it was just her time.” Many times, family members describe how their loved one survived for a few more hours or days, giving them precious time to gather their family and hold their loved one’s hand, pray, or say goodbye. Those last moments that HFD gives them mean a great deal to these grieving families.

Although the countless reunions HFD EMS has hosted far surpass the space available in this magazine, the ones featured here illustrate that every call is different and every patient is different, but the gratitude of patients, their families, and HFD members for these opportunities to be reunited remains a constant.

Diana J. Rodriguez, EMT, is Administrative Coordinator for Dr. Persse. Serving HFD EMS for over twenty-four years, she is a civilian and unofficial EMS photographer who finds the reunions particularly rewarding.



Mrs. Anne Horton was resuscitated from a cardiac arrest. Having recovered, she noticed the fire station needed a new bar-b-que pit and made a donation to Medilife of Houston 501(c)(3) for one. She returns to the fire station annually to thank the men and women who saved her.

All photos courtesy of Diana Rodriguez, unless otherwise noted.



This young lady, pictured above with her father, was struck by a drunk driver as she walked across the street with her mother. HFD worked feverishly to help her survive critical injuries. One year later, the family came to the fire station to thank the heroes that saved her life.



Fire Chief "Eddie" Corral, second from right, hosted a reunion dinner at Fire Station 51 in 2002 for all his rescuers, who had resuscitated him from a cardiac arrest a few months earlier. He served HFD for fifty years.



Thirty-five cardiac arrest survivors and rescuers attended a Survivor Luau in 2009.



The HFD 9-1-1 calltaker gave CPR instructions to Bob Diamond's wife who kept him alive until HFD arrived and took over CPR and advanced life support. The Diamonds used this photo for their holiday card last year.



Saving our own! HFD Capt. Darin Unruh went into cardiac arrest after being severely burned while fighting this house fire in 2011. HFD members rescued him and used cutting edge treatment to resuscitate him. Initially critical and in a coma for five weeks, he miraculously recovered.

Capt. Unruh returned to work and threw out a first pitch at Minute Maid Park, which hosts survivor reunions each year.



Photo courtesy of HFD.



Calltakers, dispatchers, first responders, EMTs, and paramedics from four different stations, and the on-call physician, worked to save eight-year-old Andrew Sprague, regaining a pulse before delivering him to the hospital. His family was told to expect the worst while he was in a coma at the hospital, but he miraculously beat the odds and showed his appreciation at his reunion in 2016.



A grateful mother hugs Dr. Jen Arnold from Texas Children's Hospital, which provides PediSTEPPs training free to HFD and ultimately helped save her toddler, who is shown in the photo at right.



In 2013 HFD members met the child and his family at a city hall celebration. The last time they saw him, he was not breathing. PediSTEPPs has trained hundreds of HFD members on pediatric high-risk scenarios in a specialized Simulation Center at Texas Children's Hospital with state-of-the-art equipment, including simulation theaters, a labor and delivery room, and debriefing rooms.



Jackie McKnight, a cardiac arrest survivor, met her rescuers — the 9-1-1 calltaker and firefighters — at “the breakfast klub” where she works. She said, “I love all HFD firefighters, and I am so grateful they saved my life!”



Jabari Telford months later.

Firefighters and the 9-1-1 calltaker get to meet a healthy baby Jabari. Just a few months prior, they did CPR and resuscitated him when he was delivered prematurely at home. He weighed just one pound at birth.



On July 20, 2004, Elizabeth Demaris collapsed at work while boarding passengers at Bush Intercontinental Airport. She received bystander CPR with help from Houston Police officer Edward Diaz. He called HFD and used the plane's automated external defibrillator (AED) to shock Ms. Demaris. At the reunion she expressed her thanks, hugging the HPD and HFD members who saved her.