

The EMS Experience

Saluting those with 20 years or more in EMS

Don Elbert, LP



Elbert, left, delivers a merit award to Jeremy Blaylock in 2005.

What was your first day on the job in EMS?

Wow. Early October 1974 (while trying to work through college at North Texas State University, which is now the University of North Texas)—at the first of the four ambulance/EMS jobs I've had: a funeral home-based service in Denton. I'll just say that my experiences there were very *enlightening*. And it was definitely meant to be a temporary job. But what got my attention was seeing where this could lead. "Emergency!" was on primetime TV, and Greg Taylor (now retired officer, firefighter-paramedic from Denton Fire, and good friend) and I were trying the hardest to learn about this new thing called EMS and the kind of training that was part of it. We loved the medical training that would follow.

Which services have you worked for over the years?

Well ... my career has gone from funeral home to hospital-based to fire-based to hospital-based. Denton's Westgate Hospital (now Columbia Medical Center) ran EMS for three years (1975-1978), and the clinical staff there gave us a fantastic learning experience and many opportunities for patient care and in every area of the hospital. This learning experience included EMT and paramedic training. Amazing now to think of how limited and yet-to-be-formalized these courses were in the mid-70s and how few cities had any classes to attend. Despite not being as well-developed as the courses are now, I can say that so many of the same key concepts in education we had then are still the mainstays we teach now.

But the learning process then had another side. We made acquaintance with guys like Gene Weatherall and Jimmy Dunn from *THE Department* who came to test us on skills days. We then learned

a new type of pressure. It was called *state testing*. But despite the stress of that, I appreciate now having gotten to know people like Gene and Jimmy. They were essentially the early founders of our business here in Texas. For anyone who does not know who Gene was, he eventually would become the chief of the Bureau of Emergency Management and really brought Texas EMS into a new era. God rest his soul. A dedicated guy. We hated the pressure of the test, but what really did work was this: when you prepared yourself to pass the skills testing when the "state guys" were coming to test you, you had to know it *well*, and the result was that those skills would never leave you. I now hate to find many EMTs and paramedics that don't know their basic skills nearly as well as we had to learn them years ago and the reason is, in my opinion, because of much easier testing processes today.

After Westgate Hospital gave up the EMS service in Denton County, the Denton Fire Department took over the service. I spent just short of a year there. It was a great year in my career. Good people, good equipment, working with an engine company on calls. ... I felt like I was Johnny Gage from Squad 51. In early '79 I moved back to my hometown of Tyler and went to work for East Texas Medical Center EMS. I'm so proud to have gotten on-board with an organization that would quickly become a cutting-edge company. It has believed in the right things about the business: training/education, community service and high-performance operations. I have been here for 33 years with 31 of them in the clinical department (clinical coordinator, FTO, and educator), and the company just gets better every year.

Why did you get into EMS?

I found it interesting and challenging. That simple.

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

From 1974 to now—*totally* different. I think I've seen the complete evolution of the business. This article does not have enough space to really answer the question thoroughly. But to go from the "stretcher jockey" days to what we have now has been amazing. I would've given anything to have the tools and education that are available now back when I first started. Despite that, I really like having had my early years be in a setting like we had at the hospital EMS in Denton. I have some lifelong friendships from those days. It was a close group with a lot of camaraderie. We worked together and we played together. I miss that group.

I would have never envisioned when I got my first EMT training in 1974-75 that the business could lead to CADs, GPS, NOMAD mapping, the science of capnography, the changes/additions in pharmacology, an amazing array of airway devices, powered stretchers, high-quality 12-lead monitors, extensive protocols and far nicer trucks. One significant and, I think, important change is with medications. It's not the old shotgun approach when, years ago, lots of drugs were just thrown into protocols and onto ambulances without enough evidence to their effectiveness. We all hoped that

From the left, Randy Looney, Don Elbert, Gary Drake and Brad Cole embrace their role as medics with the Denton Fire Department in 1979. All four men remained active in emergency services throughout their careers.



they would work and if one didn't you almost always had another one that you thought might. Now, the right drugs are chosen based on evidence to their effect. A lot of the "old" drugs are gone, and for good reason. The treatment that a paramedic can now provide is far more effective than years ago.

Is there a particular moment or call that stands out?

Every one of us has those certain calls that, no matter how many years later it's been, are the ones you have right at the front of your memory when asked this question. Some may be because they are some of the funniest or strangest things you could ever see. Some are because they were just simply amazing. I think most EMS providers would say, like I will, it's with a life you gave back. I feel fortunate to know I have given more than one life back to someone, and most of these cases are due to being in the right place at the right time with a defibrillator—in my opinion the single most important piece of emergency medical equipment ever created. The call that I reflect on the most occurred with a 42-year-old single mother who experienced a cardiac arrest in her bathtub at her Denton home early one morning. A Denton police officer gets credit for saving her life after he rescued her from the tub in which she was submerged. Her young daughter was unable to pull her out. It then took six defibrillations before I managed to restore her pulse. After delivering her in a deeply comatose state to the hospital, I didn't know what became of her until I was asked to run a 12-lead ECG on a patient in the ED a year later.

It didn't take long for us to discover who the other was, and I felt so good about the save I had made the previous year on this very intelligent, very personable lady who I know meant the world to her still-young child at home. To give that young girl her mother back, and to give this nice woman's life back to her was such a great feeling. And still is. Having children of my own is the only experience in life I can say that's been greater for me.

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

Easy: The great people I have worked with and my students who have given of themselves and have thrived in EMS (and in other careers). Numerous former students are practicing physicians. Many are successful EMS administrators now. Some are nurses and have achieved nurse administrator positions. Our operations director here at ETMC-EMS (and former Tyler Fire Chief) was a fire cadet when he took my EMT class. But the best part of it for me is not with those who went into other careers but with those many EMTs and paramedics who have remained on the streets and have developed into the best that can be found anywhere. And they didn't get there because of me. They got to that level by lots of years of practice at paramedicine and by being good people first. The really competent EMT and paramedic is something that only occurs with time. No one walks out of class that way nor gets there with just a little bit of experience. After being in EMS for 38 years I know, if I know nothing else, just how specialized and valuable a skilled EMT or paramedic is. I just want to think I gave them a good foundation and got them started.