

# Think About It: Four among many

By Bertha Cooper

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I arrived at Fire District 3's main station promptly at 8 a.m. I was dressed in the required uniform of the day, dark pants and dark shoes. I was looking forward to the adventure since Chief Ben Andrews invited me to go on a ride along with the district's EMS teams for the day.

Note: One of the first things I learned is to call the emergency medical service EMS instead of Medic One. Medic One is a flashback to my Seattle origins, the first city to develop such emergency services.

Assistant Chief Tony Hudson greeted me and friendly Caity Karapostoles who seems to run all things associated with the front desk handed me the rest of my uniform — a shirt labeled with the district's logo and the term “rider.”

The EMS/fire teams were changing shifts and I was led into a large room to meet the teams for the next 24 hours. I am easily one-half again to twice as old as the members of these teams. I may have been projecting, but I thought I detected a bit of wonderment at the chief inviting someone who looked more the age to need the service than learn it.

I did my best to be attentive and not dodder around.

For 24 hour saving lives

I rode with C-shift which refers to the shift rotation. Each shift is 24 hours. C-shift consists of four men, all of whom are firefighters and paramedics. It became clear right away that these men had to get along; they had to be a team that respected each other to effectively do their jobs and live together.

There seemed to be some rotating schedule of daily work assignments that ranged from driving the EMS vehicle to checking/filling supplies and making dinner.

One large room serves as the gathering place which featured a semicircle of large reclining chairs facing a big screen TV. A large wooden table on the other side of the room from the kitchen was labeled with a seating chart to place each firefighter at the table. I wondered what problem they were trying to solve with the labeling but didn't ask.

Little else adorned the large room; the closest thing to decorative art was an outdated campaign sticker on the refrigerator.

I was assigned to firefighter/paramedic Ivan Hueter for a tour through the facilities. As close as I was, I was easily overwhelmed in a forest of red and white vehicles. Two fire engine vehicles, two emergency medical vehicles and an enormous ladder truck ready and waiting to respond to threats to safety and health.

Over the years the calls to fight fires have decreased relative to the burgeoning calls for medical emergencies. But, there has been no loss of respect for the damage, real and potential, of a fire. So much so that it's all hands to a fire which essentially leaves unrelated medical emergencies uncovered during a big fire.

The first call came in and I took my place in a chair behind a partition between the back of the vehicle and the driver. The back of the vehicle looks just like it looks on TV with a treatment stretcher and equipment. The chair I was in swiveled to allow the paramedic to observe and monitor the person being transported.

I was warned before we started that since I couldn't see enough to know where we were or going to lean over and look out the front to orient myself.

I waited for the siren. There was none so I asked, "Why no rush?"

The paramedic explained that the call was important but not life or death such as cardiac and/or respiratory arrest. He said driving through intersections without stopping was risky to everyone on the road, a risk they

did not undertake unless necessary.

The next three calls I went on were with sirens.

Four lives

At this point, I will write more generally about the situations I observed as a rider out of respect for the protection of patient identities. I observed four calls in the six hours I was present. Another call took place while I was on a call.

Three calls were to homes, one was to a Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) and the call I missed was to an OMC outpatient clinic.

All four, even the one that didn't require a siren, needed paramedics to come to their home. In all four cases, the arrival of EMS was immediately followed by Olympic Ambulance Service. Two Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) from Olympic Ambulance are instructed by the

lead paramedic and begin hooking up devices to measure data such cardiac rhythm, blood pressure and oxygen concentration.

The paramedic introduced himself and immediately began assessing the patient using all his senses. He interviewed the patient and others present.

In two cases, he quickly and easily began treatment based on observations before beginning the interview. The treatment relieved the presenting symptoms. All patients were much perkier when we left.

In all cases, EMS was greeted by very anxious people, whose anxiety gradually diminished as the paramedic took charge and resolved the issue to the extent possible in the setting.

In two calls, the paramedic spoke to the office of the patient's health care provider and arranged an appointment later in the day. The serious symptoms of the two patients were temporarily relieved and they required urgent follow up for continuing relief and management.

Two patients were transferred by Olympic Ambulance to the emergency room of OMC for either admission or further treatment before returning to home or the SNF.

In all cases, the paramedic left them with instructions and an invitation to call 911 if they needed them again. The patients and others present expressed enormous relief and gratitude. It was poignant and somehow bittersweet.

The call to the SNF was a bit more complicated in that facility nurses had assessed the patient already, provided some emergency treatment without results, were highly concerned and ready to transport the patient.

Still, paramedics did their assessment which resulted in more emergency treatment onsite before the patient was transported.

I felt good just observing

Their ordinary day wasn't ordinary for me. It was a good day, though and I want to go back. There's so much more I could write, but for now, I can say that ever since, I haven't had a passing concern about the service provided by our EMS and firefighters. I feel proud.

They're trained, they have a system, they have compassion and I heard with their words, a strong commitment to quality service to our community.

My personal thanks and respect for the fine work of firefighters/paramedics Chris Turner, Ron Whitney, Joel Bower and Ivan Hueter. I hope you meet them outside their work and have a chance to thank them. If not and you need them, you are in good hands.

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