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EMS Topics > EMS Advocacy > Articles



EMS Pioneers

with [Mike Rubin](#)

Kentucky paramedic nears 50 years in EMS

John Hultgren, now a manager at Air Evac Lifeteam, began his EMS career as a high school volunteer

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One night in the early '90s, paramedic John Hultgren was nearing the end of his shift at Louisville (Ky.) EMS when his supervisor told him someone was waiting for him.

"It was this really big guy — 200 pounds at least," Hultgren recalls. "We went outside and started walking down the tracks near the building. He said, 'When I was a kid, you came to my house.' As he talked about that call, I started remembering it.

"We'd been dispatched to an alley in Louisville in '82 or '83. There was this boy, maybe eight years old, jumping up and down in front of the house, waving his arms and yelling, 'It's my mama! It's my mama!' So we grabbed the equipment, went upstairs and there was his mother lying on the floor. The father was standing there saying, 'I think she's gone.'

"We did a quick look; she was in vfib, so we started working her. We got a pulse back pretty quickly, transported her and found out about a month later she was doing fine. She'd even come to the office to thank us.

"So now it's eight or nine years later and that same kid looks at me and says, 'Y'know, all my friends have been in trouble. They flunked out of school or went to jail or both. The only reason I'm not in the same boat is because I had my mama around.'

"That's when I knew EMS is what I'm supposed to be doing."

PRE-EMS PERSEVERANCE

Hultgren's destiny was anything but clear to him when he was growing up in New Jersey. He lost his own mother in 1964.

"It was rough; I was only 11," he says. "The hospital had sent an ambulance for her, but she died en route. They turned off the lights and sirens and went to a funeral home. I'd ride my bike over to the hospital and look at the ambulance because that was the last place she'd been alive."

"I started thinking about helping out on the ambulance. I tried to volunteer, but I got no encouragement whatsoever."

It wasn't until Hultgren was in high school that he had a better chance to pursue his interest in the brand-new field of EMS.

"I was going to a boarding school in New Lebanon, New York," the 63-year-old says. "They had a fire department with a first-aid squad where I got my initial training. That carried over to college."

FROM VOLUNTEER TO CAREER CAREGIVER

Hultgren attended Ohio University, where he majored in photojournalism until the school cancelled that curriculum in the early '70s.

"I managed to get a job with The Boston Globe as a freelance photographer," he says. "While I was there, I started volunteering for an ambulance service run by the local crisis hotline. It was an alternative for people who needed transport but didn't want the city responding — ODs, for example. I liked it enough to get my EMT, but EMS still wasn't something I thought of as a career."

"One day I took a picture for the paper at some accident scene and started thinking maybe I should be on the other side of the camera. '[Emergency!](#)' was on TV by then and we'd all been exposed to this new occupation called paramedic, so I started looking for a place to get that training. I ended up in Florida, working as an EMT and going to medic school at Miami Dade College."

A NEW KENTUCKY HOME

By 1977, Hultgren had his paramedic card. He missed the change in seasons, though, and started looking for jobs up north.

"I wanted to work in Maine, but they weren't paying enough. Then I saw an ad in EMS Magazine for Louisville EMS. They were transitioning from nurses and EMTs to medics and EMTs and were trying to recruit people from other states. I went for an interview and got hired in '79."

Hultgren was promoted to operations supervisor, then left Louisville in 1988 to run Frankfort Fire and EMS. He became a flight medic and joined Air Evac Lifeteam, where he's now a manager for the

Missouri-based aeromedical service. He still calls Louisville home.

"Our company is in 15 states and I get to visit most of them," Hultgren says. "Wherever I go, I see a strong dedication to taking care of patients. Our people are always trying to improve their skills. To me, that's very encouraging."

CARING ABOUT CAREGIVERS

Hultgren feels patients shouldn't be the only beneficiaries of well-run EMS systems. He believes in mentoring colleagues, and illustrates the advantages with a story from his years at Louisville.

"There was a construction guy at our building who asked if he could bring his son to our explorer program. I was active with that group, so I said, sure.

"Well, I didn't know it at the time, but his son was totally deaf. I wasn't sure what to do with him at first. He wanted to be on the ambulance. Unfortunately, the city wasn't real keen about that, so I talked them into letting him ride with me in the supervisor's car. Whenever we got to a scene, I made a point of watching him closely. Even without being able to hear, he was a contributor — the kind of kid you root for.

"He went on to graduate high school and college, then wanted to go to med school. I helped him with his application. Today he's a cardiologist who specializes in handicapped patients — primarily the hearing impaired.

"There are unlimited opportunities to make a difference; you just need to find them. Sometimes it's helping patients, sometimes their families, sometimes your own people. You have to reach out and make it happen."

About the author

Mike Rubin is a paramedic in Nashville, Tennessee. A former faculty member at Stony Brook University, Mike has logged 24 years in EMS after 18 in the corporate world as an engineer, manager and consultant. He created the EMS version of Trivial Pursuit and produced Down Time, a collection of rescue-oriented rock and pop tunes. Contact him at mgr22@prodigy.net.

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