



 Northfield
Hospital + Clinics

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By NANCY IGLESIAS

A Tale of Two MEDICS

Northfield Emergency Medical Services provide 24-hour emergency care and transportation to 284 square miles in parts of Rice, Dakota, Scott and Goodhue counties. Paramedics and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) bring advanced care to people in their home, in the community and at the scene of an accident.

Working in the field of emergency medicine requires people who can remain calm in the midst of a chaotic scene, think on their feet, meet the physical and emotional needs of people in need with critical care and compassion, and know how and what to do with all the demands and emotions of the day. We thought it might be interesting to talk with two women who have been made this profession their career and are still honored and humbled to serve their community each and every day.

Amy Brown and Melissa DeGroot are both passionate people- passionate about their community of Northfield, about their community of emergency services providers, and about their profession. While they have different backgrounds and personalities, they have a shared sense of pride and passion for the emergency medicine services of their community.

They came to their profession through very different pathways. Brown started working in a nursing home at age 18. As part of that job, she was required to be certified in CPR. One evening, she and a friend were driving into town and came across a pretty significant accident. The individual was young, had been thrown from the vehicle and was critically injured.

This was at a time when not everyone carried a cell phone, so her friend went to a house to call for help. Brown stayed with the injured person. Brown said will never forget the specifics of that evening--the clothing the person was wearing, their hair, their breathing pattern. The person was unresponsive. (Unfortunately the person did not survive, but she said she was comforted by the fact that she knew she had provided comfort in talking to them, holding their hand and letting them know that they weren't alone.)

While she knew CPR, Brown still felt help-

less. All she could do was kneel next to them, talk to them and tell them help was on its way. From that evening on, she knew she wanted and needed to learn more, so that she could do more. A week later she signed up for a first aid class. After that course was over, she knew she still wanted to learn more. After another year she signed up for an EMT class and joined the Lonsdale Fire Department. The- then chief, Don Novak encouraged her to keep going, so she enrolled in a paramedic program.

The accident she encountered early in life has stayed with Brown and has formed the foundation of her view of the role that she and her colleagues play.

"We can't do it all, but each of us can do something. I love my job and what I do," she said. "I believe we all have special gifts we are given in this world. Each of us has a talent or something that we do that another may not be able to. There is no 'little job.' We function every day because each of us does 'something.' Whether it's holding someone's hand, assessing their medical condition and giving them the immediate care they need, or providing physical and emotional support until they can get to a medical facility, the point that paramedics meet a patient in need is extremely critical. I always tell patients, 'my goal is to leave you in better condition than I found you.'"

DeGroot's experience was a bit different. She

went to college for a short time, then returned home to Northfield after realizing it wasn't a good fit. Once home, she went to get her EMT certification at the Faribault Fire Department. Her intention was to go to school for law enforcement, and she knew getting her EMT certificate would be a good next move for that career path. About six months after getting the certification, she got job at Northfield Hospital EMS.

She initially didn't think she would stay, but she kept working there until she realized - about 10 years later - she wanted to stay in the medical field. At that point, she decided to pursue her paramedic certification.

DeGroot said she loves her job and the reality that no two days are ever the same. She has grown to deeply appreciate the medical aspect of her job and always wants to learn more. She finds the human body fascinating and is amazed at what can be done to help a sick or injured person.

She said going into a chaotic environment, assessing the situation, and coming up with a plan within minutes is one of the things that keeps her focused. "It's knowing that I've helped someone on the worst day of their life," she said.

Brown said one of the greatest challenges

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she faces is being able to “not take it home.” “It’s difficult to do a job where you see human suffering, injury, sickness and not let it affect you in some way,” she said.

Not every story has a happy ending. She finds this is especially difficult working in the same area where she grew up. She copes with this by going back to her fundamental belief that no matter what the situation, every person on the scene can do something. “I do a job that some days breaks my heart but I find comfort in knowing I did what I was able to do,” she said.

Brown said the emergency team is close-knit and they always have each other’s back. “We look out for one another,” she said. “When we know that someone has had a tough call, we check on each other and support each other through it.”

She also said it means a lot when she runs into patients or family members in the community who are grateful for how their loved one was helped. Just as meaningful are the comments from family members who express their gratitude for being there for their loved one, even if they didn’t survive.

DeGroot articulated a number of other challenges. She finds it very difficult when she gets called to help someone who doesn’t want your help, for whatever reason; not everyone is glad to see a First Responder. She is also concerned about the violence that is happening to First Responders around the country. When she started 18 years ago, she never thought she would have a bullet-resistant vest as part of her uniform.

She also worries about the industry as a whole. There is a shortage of EMT’s and paramedics, both nationally and in southern

Minnesota. On the flip side, one of her greatest joys in her role as assistant chief in her department, is seeing younger EMT’s graduating from paramedic school.

Building relationships with people in the Northfield community is an important part of their role as EMT’s and paramedics. Brown told a story of a certain couple she got to know. Several years ago it became a routine to have breakfast at a certain restaurant. There was a “sweet older couple” who came in every day as well. She and her partner frequently chatted with them while eating their breakfast or just before they all went on their way.

One morning they visited with the couple, finished their breakfast and headed out the door. Two hours later they received a 911 call for one of the individuals. In trying to assess the situation, Brown asked, “Was this happening when we saw you this morning?” The response she got was “Yes, but your breakfasts had just come and we didn’t want the two of you to have to eat cold breakfast later!”

DeGroot said she enjoys not only the relationships she has made with community members, but also with her colleagues.

“Our department is small, and very family-oriented. We work long hours and sometimes spend more time with our partners at work than our loved ones at home,” she said. “For holidays we have potlucks, and for birthdays we hit up the local cupcake shop. EMS is a 24/7, 365 days-a-year job. It’s so great to have a team to do this with. We really have fun together. This is a great career.”

Brown feels just as strongly about the team aspect of their department. She said there is no way you can be successful in this field as a “lone ranger.” She and others in the department are aided in their job by police officers,

county sheriff’s deputies, state patrol officers, firefighters, and other rescue members who also have great care and compassion.

“It’s all about being a team, a big team I’m just lucky enough to be a part of,” she said. The “911 community” is pretty tight-knit with each other regardless of their particular discipline. She also recognizes the importance of a supportive family.

“When family members see we’ve had a bad call, they know we can’t talk about it or that we can share only a little about it, so they do their best to support us,” she said.

Dr. Jennifer Fisher, Director of Emergency Department and Emergency Medicine at

Northfield Hospital, said they are very fortunate to have such a great team of emergency services staff. She said she finds it hard to put into words the respect, admiration and appreciation she has for the group.

“Paramedics and EMT’s are trained to expedite care. They are often the first ones on the scene,” Dr. Fisher said. “They are taught to recognize and identify the severity of the trauma and then become the communication link to the local hospital.”

She said that great emergency medical staff need both the technical skill and the art of intuitive thinking. “A great paramedic needs to be able to both know and feel when something is not just right,” she said.

At the end of the day, to have the quality of people they have serving out in the community as paramedics and EMT’s ultimately translates to saved lives.

Nancy Iglesias is a freelance writer and non-profit consultant. She spent 20 years working as an Executive Director for Habitat for Humanity in Winona, MN. Prior to that, she was the Marketing Manager for InterVarsity Press in Downers Grove, IL. Nancy enjoys entertaining, water fitness and teaching preschoolers at her church.



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