

## 30 years of helping people

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By Patrick Tepoorten

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Lakes Region EMS's Director of Finance Todd Fisk is celebrating 30 years of in the service of others this year. He'll be the first to tell you he loves coming to work every day. "Every day is a new day," he says. Photo by Patrick

Tepoorten

His parents moved to North Branch from Almelund in 1960, and Fisk, 48, has been in and of North Branch his entire life. He graduated from North Branch High School, at one time owned the movie theater (where he would ultimately propose marriage), and was working at a local gas station in 1978 when he was first invited to join North Branch Area Rescue.

Thirty years ago ambulances were manned on a volunteer basis, and had been reformed in the early 70s. For some time before that, ambulance service was handled by the Malmquist Funeral Chapel, which used the same vehicle to respond to emergencies as it did for the deceased. In other words, the hearse showed up whether you were dead or alive.

When Fisk got started as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), things were very different than they are today. For starters, the service responded to perhaps 100 calls a year, at an average cost of \$80 - 100 per call. Now, the service responds to 3,700 calls a year - upwards of 10 per day - with an average cost of \$1,600 - 1,700.

Perhaps one of the most significant changes he has seen over the last 30 years is improvements in training and technology.

“In the early days, if someone had a stroke, it just played out. A heart attack? No defibrillator, just CPR on a bouncy road. It wasn’t very effective.” Fisk recalls that the selling point for the service’s first defibrillator was that it would save “one of 10” cardiac arrest patients and the machine weighed between 50 and 75 pounds.

Now police cars, as well as ambulances, are outfitted with Automatic External Defibrillators that can be easily toted and used. Technology and training now allow EMTs to actually drill into bone, if need be, to provide IVs, something that was totally unheard of when Fisk started.

As medicine has become more highly specialized, so too has the emergency response. What used to be a trip to the nearest general practitioner, now involves a diagnosis in the field and the delivery of patients to medical facilities based on which specialties are needed the most.

Lakes Region has a paramedic on duty 24 hours a day, which means the ambulance service can give medication, and offer advanced life support. “Back then it was basic life support. Now, we’re like a mini-emergency room on wheels,” Fisk said.

“Medicine has just changed that much in 30 years,” he said, noting that other things have not. “When your time is up, your time is up. That hasn’t changed.”

Attitudes toward safety have changed greatly over the last 30 years as well. “We never wore gloves,” said Fisk, and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was common. No more. Now it’s gloves, masks, goggles and even gowns when large amounts of blood are present.

In the early years Fisk knew just about everybody in town. Though that has certainly changed as the area has grown, calls for people he knows, and has known all this life, are common. “It’s not always easy,” said Fisk, who recalled a call some years ago for a cardiac arrest that turned out to be a friend from Bible study. “It’s tough to see a friend go,” said Fisk, who recalled praying with the victim’s wife and daughter as Fisk’s coworkers tried unsuccessfully to save the man’s life.

But along with the tragedies comes moments of joy. Fisk will proudly tell you that he remains one of the only EMTs in the history of the service to deliver a baby. There have been close calls, but rarely has the service been called upon to play catcher in the great baseball game of life.

"I just saw the baby's father yesterday," he added, further emphasizing how local and personal Fisk's business is.

Not only is Fisk's career here in North Branch, so is his life. He met his wife when he was set up on a blind date by the other two-thirds of the "three amigos," Charlie Hult and Don White. Fisk told his two good friends at the time he "wasn't going out with anybody you set me up with." Meanwhile, his blind date Lori was telling her sister pretty much the same thing.

They did date, for three years, before Fisk proposed on the big screen at the movie theater. He still has the glass slide he used.

He and Lori now have two children, Carl, 15, and Newell, 11, and gives his family a great deal of credit for allowing him this career, which isn't always easy. Calls can come any time and have over the years affected many a weekend and family function.

He also credits his parents for passing on a good work ethic, and God for giving him the strength to do what he does. The job, with all its triumph and tragedy, is something Fisk loves dearly.

"It's a great way of life," he said. "I love coming to work because every day is a new day." One of the best parts for Fisk is the time he gets to spend with patients and helping people he has known all his life. And that also means being there when hearts are broken too. "I go to a lot of funerals," said Fisk. "I know a lot of people and a lot have supported me over the years. I want to be there for them too."

While Fisk looks back on an incredible 30 years that has seen the triumph and tragedy of the human drama and medical advances he would have thought to be all but impossible when he got started, he looks to the future with trepidation.

With the costs of health care rising exponentially, the advent of Medicare - which only pays about a third of the cost of a call, and the costs for the uninsured falling increasingly on the insured, he fears there will be a day when insurance companies will say "no more" to the system.

"Is \$1,700 a lot to pay for a call? Absolutely," said Fisk, who currently works as Lakes Region's financial director. But it isn't necessarily the call those in need pay for, it is the 24-hour availability, the technology, and the skill of the employees of Lakes Region, which is a non-profit organization. He sees the day coming when services such as his will have to be subsidized at some level, at least for capital improvements, or a mandate of service support like the state employs for local police and fire.

But, while these issues weigh heavily on Fisk, he prefers to focus on the rewards of a field that provides a service to those most in need. "People work here because they enjoy helping people. Being an EMT is a good career for a lot of reasons, and I love this business. It's been a quick 30 years."

So, what advice does a guy who has seen it all, from the moment life begins to the moment it ends, have to offer? "Live life to the fullest because tomorrow's not a given day," said Fisk.