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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 26, 2017

EMS Strong: Living the theme “Always In Service”

Muscatine fire fighter, critical care paramedic sees value in changing times

MUSCATINE, Iowa – Tom Summitt remembers a time when emergency medical service (EMS) providers were only allowed to stabilize and transport victims to the hospital. As elementary as those days were for many in the service, it was a time when the Muscatine fire fighter realized what his future held.

“I wanted to go to mortuary school,” Summitt said.

Summitt was working at Riley Funeral Home and, as many funeral homes did years ago, they had an ambulance. Things did not work out for Summitt to attend the school he wanted that year so he was asked to work with the ambulance.

“I remember the first call I went on ... it was a double fatality,” Summitt said. “I remember thinking that maybe this wasn’t for me, but it also made me think about the mortuary part and the ambulance part.”

Summitt went out on more calls and the more he went the more he was convinced to stay with the ambulance.

“I think it was just the fact of being able to help people ... the victims, the patients, and the families,” Summitt said.

He has been with EMS since 1976.



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The Riley ambulance was eventually replaced by the Muscatine Ambulance Service which then became a part of the Muscatine Fire Department. While that transition was taking place, Summitt was also advancing his certifications. He is now an EMT-Paramedic with the Muscatine Fire Department.

Changing times have also changed what an EMS can do on a call and where a patient is transported.

“When I started we basically could stabilize and transport to the closest hospital,” Summitt said. “Now we can provide any sort of medications to help different situations which can help the patient survive. This is especially important for cardiac patients. Time is muscle so a person having a heart attack needs to be treated with right medication and transported to the right facility as quickly as possible.”

The advancement in training and certifications for EMS personnel mirror the changing nature of local and regional hospitals. As larger hospitals purchase smaller hospital and centralize operations, the decision of where to transport a victim or patient largely depends on the needs of that victim or patient.

“The hardest thing about change is that you used to be able to go to a doctor or dentist here in town but it isn’t that way anymore,” Summitt said. “The specialist are not here 24-7 so when someone needs a cardiologist, for example, you have to know where to take them to receive the care they need.”

While taking care of people is an important part of his day, Summitt also enjoys educating the public about safety, especially children.

The Muscatine County EMS Association held their annual Child Safety Day on May 7.



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“Every year we seem to have more and more people attend,” Summitt said.

Not only are photographs and fingerprints taken for identification purposes, there are a lot of educational opportunities for children and their families.

“The hospital has been with us for the last four or five years and bring something different every year,” Summitt said. “This year it was geared toward how children think about themselves.”

Children also had the opportunity to see the inside of an ambulance and a fire truck. MedForce has brought their helicopter to the event in the past.

“Children have the opportunity to see inside these vehicles and learn that they are not to be afraid of,” Summitt said. “We are there to help them.”

The Fire Department also had their smoke house on hand to help demonstrate what to do in case of a fire and the Humane Society instructed children on pet safety.

“Pet safety is very important for children,” Summitt said. “When children meet a dog walking down the street or walking with a family it is important for them to know how to approach the dog.”

The children are also taught the importance of how to behave around pets in the home and what to do when they come across stray animals while outside.

Many things have changed since Summitt joined the EMS service and he credits Chief Jerry Ewers with one of the most important changes ... cooperation with surrounding departments.



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“It is great to be able to train together, to work together because that benefits everyone,” Summitt said. “Training together means that someone is going to receive the same treatment in Muscatine as they would in Wilton, West Liberty, Nichols, or any other location.”

National EMS Week concludes Saturday (May 27). The theme this year was “Always In Service”.