

One *on* One

James A. Wood

President, Wood's Ambulance Service, Gardner

When James A. Wood was learning the ropes of the ambulance business from his parents, it was a simple affair. When the phone rang at all hours of the night and day, you answered it on the first ring and did whatever you could to help. The business philosophy in those days was simple — and payment for their help was accepted, without interest, in whatever increment the patient could afford. While insurance companies and co-pays have changed the vocabulary of Wood's Ambulance Service, Jim Wood is still at the helm of a company that operates on the principles his parents established back in the 1950s, and his daughters have been on hand to help him navigate the choppy waters of the 21st century. With 75 employees and an atmosphere of trust and family friendly scheduling, Mr. Wood has taken what he learned from the first generation and is sharing it generously with the third.

You went on your first official ambulance call at age 16 with your father. Is that one of those experiences you remember like it was yesterday?

“That one I do, mainly because, unfortunately, it was a dead body. It didn't end so well. But that didn't deter me. This life is all I've ever known and I always knew this is what I would be doing.”

I guess it's best to get that experience out of the way quickly. Does it ever get easier?

“You learn to cope with it. Most of us who have been in this business for a long time have had some form of counseling. Eventually you learn that it's part of the natural evolution of life. That helps a little.”

I know the ambulance business has gone through a lot of changes in the past 50 years, but how about Gardner itself? Having lived here your whole life, you have probably seen the community change.

“It has changed a lot, but it's still a city with a great sense of community. In my parents' day, they did quite a bit of transport for polio victims, and in the following years, when Gardner had a good number of chair factories, a majority of our calls were for factory mishaps and industrial accidents. These days, it's shifted and we get more calls for psychiatric services and Medicare patients who need transport.”

What percentage of your business is strictly ambulance calls as opposed to transport services and non-emergency medical transport?

“It's a still a good 80 percent. And it's always growing and changing, and I am not so good at keeping up with those changes. I rely on Jennifer (Wood, his daughter and the company's general manager) to fill in those gaps — me and social media don't get along so well, so she handles those things and lots more.”

What qualities do each of you have that enable you to work so well with each other?

“Jen and I have the same connection my father and I had. I went everywhere with my dad, and we would be out running cables and winches and we wouldn't have to say a word — we always knew exactly what the other one was thinking. That's the way it is with Jen. You notice I don't interrupt her when she is speaking — and that's because everything she says is exactly what I was thinking, word for word. We finish each other's sentences, just like I did with my own dad. I am willing to listen to her perspective, and I like the challenge of having her questions asked of me.”

Your other daughter (Jessica Smith, transportation manager) works here, too, as does your son-in-law (Jon Bartus, fleet facilities manager). This must make family get-togethers a bit tricky.

“The thing is, with family, you say things to each other you wouldn't dare say to anyone else, but the advantage to that is that you move through problems much more quickly. I trust them all to do their jobs and I try not to interfere. As far as getting together outside of work, we do try not to talk about business, but sometimes there is something urgent or pressing that needs to be discussed. So we do.

What kind of leader are you?

“I am not someone who micromanages. I think because I've worked so long with family, I trust each and every one of my employees as though they are part of my family. I am someone who does business on a handshake, even as that gets harder and harder to do. I know what is going on in every department, but I give my staff the power to negotiate with customers and make decisions based on what they think is best. That has worked well for me so far.”

Compiled by correspondent Amanda Roberge

