

EMT Lee honored for poise, professionalism

Written by Deb Egenberger
Friday, 27 July 2012 14:11 -



TRAVIS LEE

All Travis Lee knew when his pager went off at 4 a.m. on July 10, 2011, was that there was an injury accident on Interstate 80 between Cozad and Gothenburg.

He had no idea he would relive what he saw over and over for the next year ... and beyond.

In the middle section of a motor home traveling from Ohio to Colorado, Peter Smith was putting on his shoes while his wife Linda drove, his sister and brother-in-law rode and his two children lay sleeping in the back of the vehicle.

A sudden loud impact in the rear of the camper caused an explosion, sending the vehicle crumbling into the pavement.

Glass shattered and metal scraped on metal as a semi-trailer ground along the driver's side of the camper.

When the vehicle came to a stop, flames were shooting up over the windshield as Peter's relatives attempted to get his injured wife out of the driver's seat.

When Peter turned to the back of the camper to get his children out, he leapt toward the sleeping compartment, only to fall through and land on the road.

He feared his children had died in the debris that was strewn behind the RV amid the oncoming

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traffic.

As the assistant rescue chief in Cozad and a registered EMT, Lee was responsible for coordinating the efforts of those aboard the ambulance that hot summer night.

“We learned through radio communication as we were driving from the fire hall to the scene that there were children involved and that they had been ejected,” Lee said.

That was little mental preparation for what those emergency responders saw.

“The camper was basically disintegrated and there were clothes and everything all over the road,” Lee said. “And the fire from the semi was all around us. It was horrible.”

It didn’t take long for Lee to realize how bad the accident was. His EMT training kicked in.

“There were two children, both lying in the driving lanes,” Lee said. “I knew right away we needed to help them.”

It took roughly 10 minutes for Lee and his crew to stabilize 12-year-old Will Smith, the most critically injured of the victims, and have him ready for transport.

“My responsibility was to give orders and provide care,” Lee said

Two other family members were attended to at the same time.

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In a letter to the awards chairman of the Nebraska Statewide EMS Conference, Peter Smith recounted the shocking details of the accident and the proficient actions of Lee and his rescue crew.

“He ordered up the necessary equipment to stabilize and backboard Will with swift but careful precision,” Peter Smith wrote. “His professional poise under dangerous conditions, with the nearby truck explosions and fire, made his act of unselfish bravery all the more impressive.

“I have never, in my life, witnessed such composure and sharp thinking from a person in such a horrible scene.

“Travis Lee braved fire and explosions to rescue my son, Will. He assessed a volatile situation and a victim’s serious condition and took appropriate action that saved the life of a boy with a traumatic brain injury. Today, that boy can talk, may walk again and is the son we nearly lost and now have back.”

As Lee sat at the Nebraska Statewide EMS Conference in Kearney listening to a speaker reading a letter, the situation being relayed sounded familiar.

And the images in his mind suddenly became all too clear.

He could once again see the camper, the fire, the still bodies.

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“I think I relived the whole thing again,” he said.

When Lee was announced as Nebraska’s EMS Person of the Year, he was floored, speechless and grateful he was in a room of fellow EMTs.

“I kind of got to thinking I might need an EMT myself at that moment,” he joked.

Honored and overwhelmed, Lee is still trying to soak it all in.

“I was just floored,” Lee said of the award, “but in the end, it doesn’t change what I do. My goal is still and always will be to provide the best care possible on every rescue call.”

Will Smith spent five weeks in Kearney’s Good Samaritan Hospital after being transferred there from Cozad Community Hospital the night of the accident.

The neurosurgeon offered little hope, at the time, that Will would recover from the brain injury.

But after four more months in Columbus Nationwide Hospital in Ohio, Will was discharged on Dec. 14, 2011, to recover at home.

Although Will Smith and his rescuer have yet to meet in person, Lee has kept tabs on the boy.

“For awhile, I checked the Caring Bridge webpage every day,” Lee said. “It’s amazing how connected you can feel to a person you’ve only come in contact with through an accident

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scene.”

Peter Smith assures Lee through his award nomination letter that he will meet Will in person one day.

“We hope to return to Nebraska,” Peter wrote. “Will does not know Travis but I’m sure the hug he will eventually give him will only be a small way of saying thank you.”

Travis Lee moved to Cozad in 1991. He has been a member of the Cozad Volunteer Fire Department for 14 years and an EMT with the squad for 12 years.

Lee works as operations coordinator for Dawson Tire and Wheel in Gothenburg, overseeing shipping and receiving.

Lee and his wife, Candi, have been married 18 years. They have two sons. Devin, 17, hopes to study fire and rescue after high school. Jonathan is a 16-year-old sophomore in Cozad.