

Maintenance workers turned heroes

For several Texas Department of Transportation road crew members, April 14 started similar to any other — repairing a westbound entrance ramp along Interstate 10 in front of Ford Park. But their jobs quickly changed from maintenance workers to heroes when a horrific wreck unfolded just a few hundred feet away from where they were working.

“It sounded like a bomb going off,” said TxDOT’s John Barron, flinching slightly as though the memory was running through his head again.

It was a scene that shut down the westbound lanes of the highway for several hours when a Chevy Silverado and a Dodge pickup collided at about 2 p.m. on the eastbound lanes, sending them over the median and directly into westbound traffic. The Dodge then hit a Mercury Cougar and a Lincoln SUV while an 18-wheeler struck the Chevy.

Holly Rollins, who was ejected from the Cougar, died in the wreck.

Crew Chief Barron, along with TxDOT’s Calvin Lavergne and Ricky Eakin, stopped what they were doing and surveyed the scene just 240 feet away.

“Debris was flying everywhere and the truck started rolling and you could see the oil rolling out of the truck,” said Barron, who added that it was the worst wreck he had

ever seen.

The crew immediately checked which way the wind was blowing and tried to look for a placard on the 18-wheeler to evaluate if there were hazardous materials involved.

“You could smell the oil,” Barron said.

Then, just moments after they determined the scene was secure from hazard, they sprung to action.

“The first car was smoking. I ran and retrieved the fire extinguisher and put out the fire in the Cougar and then I ran up to the Chevy white pickup truck and put out the flames on the engine,” Barron said.

On his way to extinguish the flames, Barron stopped to check on 33-year-old Rollins and knew there wasn’t much his first-aid training could do to help her.

“I didn’t see her moving or making any noise,” said Barron as he looked to the ground, shaking his head slightly. “I knew she was probably dead.”

Eakin and Lavergne ran toward the 18-wheeler and tried to keep the driver calm until the fire department arrived just five minutes later.

“Nobody likes hearing sirens, but I was glad to hear them,” Eakin said. “It meant help was on the way.”

Once the medical experts moved in, the TxDOT workers continued to help the best way

they knew how — traffic control.

District Engineer Bryan Wood in Beaumont praised the bravery of his employees for responding to the accident in such an unselfish and heroic manner.

“These crews work in dangerous situations every day on our roadways,” Wood said. “I am so grateful to these employees and what they did to help others in need, which may have saved lives at that scene. Their work ethic is a benefit to the state and we are all very proud of them.”

For Lavergne, Eakin and Barron, rushing to the rescue was not heroic — it was a duty.

“I didn’t do anything that anybody else wouldn’t do,” Eakin said.

And for Barron, it wasn’t his first time being honored for his heroism. About 15 years ago, he was working on the Veterans Memorial Bridge when a co-worker at Williams Brothers Construction Co. fell in the water.

“I jumped in after him,” Barron said. “I can’t see leaving anybody there.”

Barron barely survived. The man he tried to save did not.

“If I can help anybody, I’m there,” Barron said.

Jennifer Walsh is a public information officer at the Texas Department of Transportation.

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Courtesy photo