

Step by step:

A Collin College student's journey from lifeguard to physician

by Heather DARROW



The sun's rays were gently warming the city pool and Russell Prichard, who sat perched comfortably in his lifeguard chair with a whistle dangling from his neck. It seemed like an ordinary day until he saw the expression on his boss' face as he raced toward him. A middle-aged man collapsed while swimming laps in the indoor pool, and Prichard, known as the guy who was calm in emergencies, was selected to deal with the crisis.

"The man had a stroke. I was delegating tasks, and people were running to get oxygen and calling the paramedics. My boss shut down the

outside pool to get me specifically. I've always taken a lot of pride in that. My actions were calm, but I was thinking a mile a minute. I knew I should be doing something else, but I had exhausted the list of what I could do as a lifeguard. I felt so helpless. The EMTs came and told us we did exactly what we were supposed to do. I watched them, and as they took the patient away I thought, 'I could do that.'"

Step 1

Prichard decided to take EMT classes at Collin College. After achieving this goal, he considered

taking more classes to earn paramedic certification. At first, he wondered if he had made the right decision, but atypical reassurance was on the way. He was driving with his wife to his mother-in-law's house when a car flew by and rolled three or four times, finally stopping on the access road. Prichard's wife watched an eerie calm come over her husband as he dodged flying car parts and pulled up behind the car. As an EMT, he was well versed in splinting, bandaging and cervical support, and he could provide the paramedics with a stability checklist and save them time as they offered advanced life support.

"I asked my wife to call 911 and get my gloves from the trunk. There was a baby in the back seat. The husband in the front seat had been shot in the leg, and he and his wife were trying to get to the hospital. All three passengers were A&O—alert and oriented—times four. They had the highest level of consciousness and were mentally alert. Knowing that is important because of possible concussions and intracranial bleeds. I stabilized the patient and assessed the gunshot wound and put pressure on it," he said.

Soon carloads of family members arrived followed by the paramedics who told Prichard that he did a good job. Fifteen family members shook his hand and thanked him.

As if that wasn't enough validation, a few months later Prichard was at a gas station pumping gas when he heard a loud crash. One car hit another car in the intersection, spinning the car and passengers around. Prichard sprinted across the road to help.

"A mom and son were in the front seat. The boy was only about 60 pounds and was unconscious and

bloody. I immobilized his spine. Ultimately, there were a total of three cars involved in the accident, and I asked all of the other passengers if they were okay," he said.

Step 2

Assured he was making the right decision, Prichard enrolled in Collin College's paramedic program. While he was in college, he helped with a truck that rolled, and after receiving his paramedic certification he helped another car accident victim.

"For about three years, it was happening all the time. I always felt gratified that I could help. It felt good to know that I accomplished something," he said. According to Prichard, in the middle of paramedic school he learned to insert tracheostomy tubes and actually put in seven in the field. One time, he had the opportunity to watch a patient receive a coronary artery bypass graft at the hospital.

"They were holding his heart, and I was back in that zone and thinking maybe there was something more out there for me."

Step 3

Prichard decided to go back to school, and once again he chose Collin College. He took numerous science classes, was named to the dean's and the president's lists and was selected to join Phi Theta Kappa international honor society. He transferred to the University of Texas at Dallas to take upper level courses.

"I had fantastic professors at Collin College. I always have to learn why. I am a big picture person. My biology professor, Dr. Sukanya Subramanian, put things in laymen's terms and addressed the big picture. There was no guessing. The first thing she did was ask if you understand what would happen if you knocked out a certain enzyme. My chemistry professor, Dawn Richardson, used the tangible analogy of actors in a play. One enzyme always does this because it is its nature. It was amazing for me," he said.

Prichard always took his science classes concurrently to see how they

intersected. He says the classes were rigorous, and he studied every day.

"I learned the material; I didn't memorize it. The onus should be on the student to get the education you want. I wanted to know what my teachers knew. At Collin, the professors asked questions that made me think about what I was learning in ways I hadn't ever thought about. That is big for me. You cannot get that from a book," he said.

Step by step, Prichard's experiences at Collin College helped him transition from lifeguard to EMT to paramedic, and this summer he will begin another chapter in his journey—as a medical student at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

For more information about classes at Collin College, visit www.collin.edu. ❖

Heather Darrow is a public information writer for Collin College.

Photos, Nick Young, Collin College.