Pokey Harris: Controlling Chaos with Compassion

~ By Stephanie Porter-Nichols/*Staff*

Almost daily, Pokey Harris sees someone experiencing the worst moment of his life. That exposure to personal and community tragedies influences her view of life and her living.

With 20 years of experience in emergency management work, she's a long way from the high school student in Wise County who wanted to become a flight attendant. She's grateful that when she declared she wasn't going to college, her dad gave her an ultimatum: Go to college or move out. She went to college and today declares, "I'm so glad he did that."

Her parents drilled a work ethic into Pokey early in life. They owned a feed store, mobile-home park and rental property. To help out with the family businesses, Pokey went to work at age 13 and hasn't stopped. She credits her late parents with loving and caring for their family. She gives a nod to her mother for her business sense and one to her father for her disposition.

Pokey began her career path following that business knowledge, focusing on office and business management. She took a job doing such work for the Southwest Virginia Emergency Services Council that supported emergency services in the region. In that position, she was encouraged to take an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) class. Before long, she meshed her management skills with emergency services. "The two melded and it worked for me," she said. She served a stint as Smyth County's 911 coordinator and today serves as Washington County's (Va.) director of emergency management.

She recognizes the weight of that position. Washington County is home to more than 55,000 people, but is also visited by hundreds of thousands of people each year. She continually works to better equip herself for the job. When she decided to pursue a master's degree a few years ago, she found a program through which she could earn a master's of public administration with an emphasis in emergency management.

While Pokey possessed many of the skills needed for emergency management, she's had to learn others. Some days, before she can even leave home, an emergency has occurred and her priorities for the day have changed. "Being able to change at a moment's notice" is a learned skill for Pokey. Her organizational side likes to complete every project, but she acknowledges there are only so many hours

sustain her. First is her faith in God. "I've always depended on the Lord....At work and home, with family and friends, He's everything to us." And, she praises her husband of 22 years, Steve, for his support. "He understands the love I have for my job." Even when she took on the extra work of a degree, she said, "He encouraged me to chase that dream." She also gives credit to the department's deputy director and all the people with whom they work. While they may carry out different duties, Pokey said they are working toward a common vision. "We all want to accomplish something for the citizens we serve."

Work in public safety often requires responders to help people who are unfamiliar with their services. Whether it's an individual calling 911 for help, a structure fire or a community disaster like the tornado that struck Glade Spring, Pokey said, it may be the only time those calling ever need emergency services, but when they do "we need to be there 100 percent."

In the midst of a disaster, Pokey sees the ultimate goal of her work to be making controlled chaos out of chaos. "Generally," she said, "you're dealing with someone at the worst point of their life. That's a lot of responsibility. You have to help that person return to normal.... But whether it's a mother with a choking baby calling 911 or storms..., it is chaos."

She describes helping people get shelter, medicine and the basics of life, but she also contends "there are times you just sit down and cry with people."

In a crisis, she said, more than anything, people need "to know that someone cares and that someone is truly trying to help them."

Even when it's working a fuel spill on the interstate, Pokey tries to put herself in the trucker's shoes. Her husband is a trucker and she thinks about how she would want her counterpart in another locality to treat him.

Pokey has gained insights about her fellow man from years of working disasters. When circumstances are at their worst, people will put aside animosity, even hatred, and come together to give help. "There is good in everybody," she observed.

In the midst of chaos, she's learned simple solutions are often the best.

She also knows the importance of closure. In October, she gave a final

Pokey Harris was recently tapped by Gov. Bob McDonnell to share her skills on the Virginia E911 Services Board. She just completed two terms on the Governor's EMS Advisory Board.
-photos by Stephanie Porter-Nichols

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tornado recovery, reflecting on the lives lost and the good of recovery work. Two and a half years later, the county needed that closure, she said.

Her skills and experience don't just benefit Southwest Virginia. She just completed two three-year terms on the governor's EMS Advisory Board. Recently, the governor tapped her again. This time to serve on the Virginia E911 Services Board. She also gives to the region, serving on the United Way's board and to Smyth County as a member of its planning commission.

She explains her service. "Deep in my heart, I want to make a better community for everybody... in all our communities." She wants her service to touch other lives for the better and encourage other people to pursue their passions, even be a mentor, she said, acknowledging the many people who've helped her.

Seeing small and big disasters has increased Pokey's awareness of the fragility of life. "I know I need to live every day, be with family and friends, but I'm giving so much to work that I don't always do that." She does try to unplug and enjoy time with Steve and their six horses, two mules, dog and cat on their small farm.

The regular exposure to tragedy has given Pokey a heightened state of preparedness. Her laptop bag possesses all she might need at any given moment. Her horse trailer serves another job besides transporting her animals on a camping trip. It's filled with water, canned goods and other necessities.

But perhaps the greatest impact of the heart-wrenching situations on Pokey has been on the amount of tears she sheds. She acknowledges crying more easily these days. "It's not out of stress or weakness," she explained. "For all I've seen, all I've done, I have so much compassion."

Pokey Harris has long been blessed with organizational and management skills, which she daily brings to her job as director of emergency management for Washington County.
-photo by Stephanie Porter-Nichols

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