

## TEXAS A&M PARKING PROFESSIONALS SAVE DRIVER'S LIFE

By **Kim Fernandez**

If you could save a stranger's life by risking your own, would you do it? That was the real-life question sprung on two parking and transportation professionals at Texas A&M University in November during their early-morning drives to work: a car into a tree, a trapped driver, flames under the hood, and no time to think about possible consequences. What would you do?

### The Crash

Nov. 14 was game day at Texas A&M—the last regular football game of the season. Joel Luce, nighttime enforcement supervisor, and Gregg Stuenkel, facilities maintenance leader, were on their way to start setting up at 5:30 a.m. when they came upon an unthinkable scene.

"I was driving down George Bush Drive when I saw a vehicle that appeared to have hit a tree," says Luce, who's worked for the university for 16 years. He asked two people sitting nearby if they were all right. They pointed to the car and said the driver was still inside.

"I turned to look at the car and saw it was on fire underneath," Luce says. "I ran to his door and saw he was pinned and had blood running down his face. I asked him if he was OK, and he said, 'Please, just get me out of here.' I told him, 'I'm not going to leave you.'"

Stuenkel, Luce's colleague came up the road in his truck at about that moment and saw the car in the tree with flames under the hood. "I didn't know anyone was in there," he says. "Then Joel yelled for me to come help get the guy out." After a desperate search for a fire extinguisher came up empty, the two men grabbed a sledgehammer and started breaking windows and pulling on door handles hard enough to break them off.

College Station Police Officer Patricia Marty arrived on the scene, handed Stuenkel a fire extinguisher, and went to work trying to free the car's driver while Stuenkel tried to put the fire out. "I got the fire out," he says, "but the extinguisher ran out." Within seconds, the flames reignited.

"We kept talking to him," Stuenkel says. The man was awake, aware, and terrified, pinned in the car by his legs, listening to Luce repeat, "If you go, I'm going with you." Working together, the two men and the police officer bent the driver-side window frame with their hands, pulled the driver through the opening, and dragged him clear of the wreck. Fire first responders



arrived and extinguished the fire, and the 21-year-old car driver was taken to the hospital, but no one was sure he'd survive his multiple injuries along with breathing in heavy smoke.

"There was so much smoke," says Luce, who was treated for inhalation after the incident. "I backed off the car a few times so I could breathe, and we were trying to break the back windshield with a radio to give the driver some air."

### Reaction

Peter Lange, executive director of transportation services at Texas A&M, says the story seemed unbelievable when people started hearing it later that day.



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“Our people were some of the first on campus that day,” he says. “We didn’t hear about it until we got to campus, and it was like, ‘Wow, I can’t believe that happened. I can’t believe everybody is OK.’”

While his first reaction was surprise, he says he didn’t doubt for a second that his people would risk their own lives to save another. “I’d be surprised if they didn’t help,” he says. “Nobody ever has to help, but I’m not surprised they did.” Watching the police dashcam video of the incident, he says, drove home the professionalism of Luce and Stuenkel.

“You see Gregg shooting the fire extinguisher and the fire goes out,” he says. “Two seconds later, the fire’s back.”

Both Luce and Stuenkel says while it felt like they were on-scene for a long time, the whole thing was over in minutes, giving them very little time to think about what they were doing.

“I really didn’t think about my own safety,” says Luce. “It wasn’t an option to leave him. That thought never crossed my mind. I was outside the car—he had it much worse than I did. I thought the car was going to blow up like you see in the movies, but I had a better chance of making it than he did.”

Stuenkel agrees: “If I was in a car like that, I’d want somebody to get me out,” he says. “The adrenaline was pumping for sure, and we knew we had to get him out. That’s all I could think about.” He may have had the line of the day—when the driver was out and the fire department had extinguished the fire, he remembers asking if he could leave. “I had things to do,” he says.

“We didn’t think of it as being heroes,” he says. “It was just helping somebody in need. We’d want somebody to help us if we were in that situation.”

Others, however, disagree. Luce has heard from the driver’s aunt and the driver himself since the accident—he survived and is recovering from multiple injuries and surgeries—and they definitely think of everyone involved as a hero. So does the community: The incident made headlines both locally and as far away as the U.K., where the *Mirror* covered it about a week

later. Lange and his staff say they’ve heard that Luce has been nominated by the driver’s family for a Carnegie Hero award.

“We are extremely proud,” says Lange. “It was a huge effort. People who saw the car and the tree couldn’t believe anyone survived. In fact, we didn’t know the driver survived for a few days after.”

“I wasn’t expecting attention at all,” Luce says. “Co-workers started calling me later that afternoon. You know, we have people who do this sort of thing every day. Those are our firefighters and police officers. I just happened to be there before they were, and I did what I think anybody would have done.”



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