

Paramedic recounts life of both births and deaths

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

'I've been a paramedic for 34 years,' Debra Eccles said.

We were seated, talking about her very long career, in her back yard. Her English Mastiff dogs, one amber, the other brindle, were hanging out with us, two brindle pups completing the picture. The yard is entirely grass.

'I used to have a garden with vegetables, but, just as it was ready, the dogs would eat it,' smiling with a dog owner's tolerance of their pets' whimsy. 'After a few years of this, I decided to just grow grass.'

Ms. Eccles graduated from Humber College in 1984 as a paramedic but she had gone into nursing first.

'I got to the point where I didn't want to feed puree to old people any more. So, I went back to school to be a paramedic.'

She said, 'I almost flunked typing in high school. I was mostly interested in sports - basketball, baseball. I had to do the sciences and maths; they were easier -' she joked - 'than typing.'

For 16 years, she worked as a paramedic in Toronto, as a primary, then advance, then critical.

'I was always interested in being in medicine. Whether that was because I was brought up on a farm and doing medicine with the animals, I don't know. It was a mixed farm - cows and sheep.'

'I spent two years in college and then back to school, for six months, a year. It's a continuing education skill set. We're directly connected to the doctors. When we're not exactly sure, the protocol is we call them and get permission to do what we think we need to.'

'We bring the emergency room to the patient,' is how she sees what she is doing. 'We work as partners. If one partner makes a decision that's not the best, we usually step up. We cover all of it, asking ourselves, did I catch everything? We ask the people on the scene, did you see something I missed?'

Continuing to paint the picture of an emergency, 'We have to calm the chaos - make sure there's only one patient or victim, call the allied services - fire and police. Those 'guys' - I mean all of them, male and female - are great people. We might call other area ambulances as well.'

Outlining how she came to be living in the country, she said: 'When I was working the city, I was living in the city. I drew a line around how far I was willing to travel back and forth and moved to my home here, until my partner, who also lived in the area, and I fell asleep on the way home one time. We wound up in a ditch, neither of us was hurt but I thought, I can't do this and quit Toronto to come and work in Dufferin.'

Ms. Eccles' move to the country was the beginning of her having the dogs in her life.

'They used to be called Old English Mastiff, then, there was a move to call them all just Mastiffs. But there are lots of different Mastiffs so we went back to English and dropped the Old.'

In some measure, she breeds and shows them, as much for the fun and camaraderie as anything else.

She explained, 'I've shown them at the Westminster Dog Show in New York, Colorado and in Canada, mostly to show people the breeding of the dogs I have. I like the camaraderie of the other owners. I have good friends in Vermont and Washington State.'

'They are almost essential in my life; they keep me grounded. Showing is the completely opposite to what my work is.'

It is a lot years with what appears to be a stressful job. However, Ms. Eccles was clear that she loves this job and, in answer to why, she told us, 'It's always changing. It's never the same thing twice. Even the car crashes - could be a new vehicle or an old historical one. There could be issues - the person has other medical issues. In some scenes, they should be dead and they're fine.'

'I've seen cars wrecked and we're looking for a badly damaged or dead person; we get him out and he stands, dusts himself off...'

Then, there are the babies, 14 of them to date.

'I've birthed babies. They [the parents] think they have time - at home or on the way to the hospital - it's coming faster than they thought.'

She gave a wistful smile at the memories: 'Fortunately, they almost deliver themselves. It can be a bit nerve wracking until you hear them crying. Crying is a good sign.'

She admitted, 'I don't know how much longer I'll do this. My health is sticking with me. The young ones coming up don't know how to 'unsee' an incident. There was a big car accident on Hwy 10 recently and it was mostly young ones attending it. We reached out to them to offer to help them unload it, talk about it. You put it in the back of your mind and your mind gets full. If you don't deal with it, it comes back to you.'

Telling us the what and why of it: 'the outcome was set before you got there. You can't change death. So, you have to tell yourself:

'I can't change this; I did my best but I can't change it'.

?It's always worst during holidays. They' re making cars better ? there's less injuries in cars.?

If the young paramedics are ready to do the job, ?I hope so.?

Asked what she would say to young people looking to this as a career, she tells them: ?It is amazing. You should do it but you have to recognize if it's not for you, you should move on.

?You never know what you're going to see. If you can't allow people to make their own decisions, you should think about a different career.?

About the bottom of it, she mentioned, ?Hearing the parents' cry for their loss?

Yet, the best of it is when change is possible: ?You see the change ? the chest pain is gone and we made a difference today. That's the good part, making the difference. That's probably why I'm still doing it.?