



**Wharton County
Junior College**

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HOW TO SAVE A LIFE

Bonewald stresses cutting-edge skills, training for WCJC EMS students

WHARTON, TEXAS – There are no shortcuts when it comes to learning how to save a life. And that's something students learn from day one when enrolled in Wharton County Junior College's Emergency Medical Services program.

"I tell the students that one of these days they're going to be working on me – and that's the standard we hold them to," said EMS Program Director Gary Bonewald.

Bonewald knows what it takes to be a successful paramedic, spending the past 34 years involved with EMS. His practical experience includes stints with Lavaca County Rescue Service, Washington County EMS and the City of Wharton EMS, where he spent 12 years as a full-time paramedic. Bonewald has the education to match his field experience, earning an associate's degree from WCJC in 1995, obtaining a bachelor's from the University of Houston in 1999 and achieving his master's from UH in 2003.

"There are two things I enjoy: being a paramedic and teaching others how to do it," he said.

Bonewald came to WCJC as a full-time instructor in May of 2014 and has since been named the program's director. He previously taught at WCJC on a part-time basis in the late 1990s before deciding to go back and further his own education. His experience as an instructor also includes stints at Galveston College and Houston Community College.

Bonewald's expertise and attention to detail is a draw for new students – and not just from Wharton County. The current cadre of students comes from all over southeast Texas, with one student making an 80-mile trip from Yoakum to attend classes.

"We have a huge area we are serving," Bonewald said.

Rosenberg-resident Josh Flores is currently an EMT but decided to return to school for additional certification. He said the quality of WCJC's program attracted his attention.

"A lot of employers want us to achieve a higher skill level and when I learned that WCJC had this new group of instructors, I knew this was the place I needed to be," Flores said. "Gary and the other instructors are very thorough and they take the time to make sure we know the material."

Like Flores, EMS student Megan Hardy came to WCJC in order to further her skills. She currently works with Austin County EMS.

“I really like the instructors,” said Hardy, who calls Orchard home. “I feel like I’m really learning what I’ll need to know out there in the field. The program is very hands on.”

That’s not by accident. One of Bonewald’s goals since taking over as program director has been to raise the bar on the more practical side of training. Students have the chance to test their abilities before they hit the streets on such devices as a full-sized ambulance simulator, lifelike mannequins and the latest defibrillators and monitors. They also perform rotations with area Emergency Rooms and Operating Rooms.

“There’s a lot of new equipment here and the training is very practical,” said EMS student David Bush of Wharton.

Bonewald relies on an experienced team to assist with the demanding EMS curriculum. Program faculty includes full-time EMT lead instructor Frank Becak and part-time instructors Obie Adkins, Mike Nixon and Karl Johnson.

The training is a boon to graduates – whether they’re already employed by a department or seeking their first job. In 2013, nearly 90 percent of program graduates found employment, with an average starting salary of \$25,000 to \$45,000.

“Many EMS departments are sending their employees to us for advanced training,” Bonewald noted. “If you have a good product, more people are willing to come to you.”

WCJC’s EMS program offers several paths to meet a student’s needs. The “Level 1” certificate program is 23 semester credit hours and results in an EMT or Advanced EMT certification. The “Level 2” certificate is 45 credit hours long and aimed at students who seek paramedic status. There’s also an associate’s degree, which requires 60 credit hours. EMT classes are offered at the Richmond and Wharton campuses while paramedic classes are available only in Wharton. The program is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs.

Bonewald’s future goals are to expand into new areas while upgrading the training methods. The overall purpose is to ensure that graduates are properly trained for the job ahead.

“There are people alive today because of the foundation we’re providing our students,” Bonewald said.

For more information on the Wharton County Junior College EMS program, please visit the college’s website at www.wcjc.edu

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