

gnat 55: cardiac arrest.

The call is outside the Cayce crew's usual call area. Lexington Medical Center has an urgent-care center in Swansea, but the patient needs more care than it can give. And the two closest ambulances are already on calls.

So Hines and Clements leave the hospital, lights flashing. Clements punches the siren on as they approach the light at U.S. 378 outside the hospital. They stop anyway: Cars are speeding by. As other traffic finally slows, a green minivan darts left just a few feet in front of the ambulance.

Drivers like those are emergency workers' pet peeves.

"It gets frustrating sometimes, especially when they go quote (response) times to us, and we're sitting at a light," Hines says.

Soon the crew is heading down I-26. Clements drives as Hines sits in the back, calling out directions and trying to finish writing a patient report.

"You messed my R up," Hines complains. "My D looks like a B."

"I'm sorr-EEE!" Clements answers as she drives.

In 1981, Hines was working, refinishing furniture, when he signed up for an EMT class that cost only \$50. "I was bored," he says. "I didn't have anything to do at night."

That's no longer a problem. Hines is 37, married and a father of four. It's hard to keep track of all the projects he does outside work: He's written a musical; he's involved in starting an alternative-music magazine; and he writes and performs puppet shows in local churches.

When he's not on duty, Hines wears three earrings. On duty, latex gloves hide the two rings he wears on each hand, including his wedding ring on his left hand and a silver lion's head on his right pinkie. He keeps track of the babies he's delivered: so far, eight, including his daughter.

Clements is 20 and still lives

standing firefighters with basic life-support equipment to help at certain calls until EMTs arrive.

But a speedy ambulance is still a key part of helping an injured patient. Medical workers say the chance of a person surviving an injury drops if they don't receive hospital care within the first hour of being hurt.

"We want to try to keep it in the 'golden hour,'" Hines says. "If we can get there faster, it's always more beneficial."

Like several other EMS workers on C shift, Hines says he doesn't know of a time he's lost a patient by getting there too late.

He says it's too hard to know what happens before an ambulance arrives. And he's learned not to spend time thinking about the patients who die.

"My belief is pretty simple. That's not my job — that's in God's hands. I've got my job, and He lets me do it."

One wreck, three ambulances. Lexington's emergency workers rotate around the county's 10 EMS stations. They go to work each day at a different station with a different partner. Some crew members say they would rather work the same areas every shift.

Although they carry detailed maps, Hines sometimes lose a few minutes looking for where they're going.

Today, Hines is working in Cayce again, this time with EMT Artie Chavis.

Chavis is married with two children. He lives in Swansea, where he used to work as a firefighter. He's just finished his training to become a paramedic. On his days off, he works at a metal shop.

With pay that ranges from \$21,000 to just under \$33,000, many of the EMTs and paramedics work a second job.

So far this shift, Hines and Chavis have taken three patients to the hospital: a motorcyclist with a broken leg, a woman who



At Lexington Medical Center, Hines and Chavis wheel a patient into the emergency room.

prisoners to Palmetto Richland Memorial Hospital. Chavis rides in back, alternating between the three prisoners. He checks their blood pressure and their blood-oxygen levels. He goes over each one head to toe, asking about sore spots. One says his back and neck hurt; another says it's his shoulder.

Security guards meet the ambulance at Richland's emergency department, but Chavis and Hines have no extra security during the trip. As it turns out, that isn't a problem. All the prisoners are serving time for nonviolent crimes. But with EMS workers walking into so many crisis situations, most have stories of being punched or choked. Some have arrived to find people who have just shot or stabbed someone still holding the weapon. Such cases happen less often now — EMS crews try not to enter potentially violent scenes without police there.

Back at the Cayce station, Chavis and Hines talk about the response-time controversy. They say most of the problem comes from having 10 ambulances to cover a 750-square-mile county that's growing fast.

"Tom (Gross) is an awesome director, and he's gotten a lot of fire," Hines says, referring to the head of Lexington County's EMS service. "I think he's doing a really good job, considering what's going on."

"I wish we had an ambulance at every fire station," Chavis says.

Both point out that the county's first responders — the firefighters — can save lives, even with less medical equipment than an ambulance.

The proposal to put the hospital

hour. Hines is flipping channels on the TV in the fire station living room. He'll spend the entire shift sleepless — an example of why Gross wants to convert his crews from 24- to 12-hour shifts.

Then the call comes in. Signal 32, a spinal injury, east of Lexington. Again, it's outside the Cayce crew's normal call area.

Nineteen minutes later, they are met at the door by Fay Shull. Her mother is visiting and has fallen out of bed. She can't get up, and Shull, who uses a walker herself, can't help.

Shull's mother, Mamie Crews, is 94. Still sleepy, she's not sure exactly what's happened.

Hines squats down to talk with her. Is she in pain anywhere? How did she fall?

Crews is in luck. Nothing is broken. Hines and Chavis slowly help her stand. They pivot her around and help her to sit on the bed.

Hines questions Shull about what happened while Chavis checks Crews' pulse and blood pressure.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"My name's Artie, ma'am."

"Pleased to know you."

Hines returns, and the pair help Crews lie down. They cover her with a sheet, arrange her pillows, turn out the light. She will be asleep before they reach the front door.

They talk quietly with Shull as they leave, off to answer the next call for help. She thanks them for coming.

"Not at all," Hines tells her. "We were glad to be here."

Lisa Greene is writing about emergency medical service. Call her at (803) 771-8659.

The audit also said the county spends less on emergency medical service than similar South Carolina counties and works its crews harder.

The problem? Lexington County is growing faster than anywhere else in the state, and emergency services haven't kept pace. The county has six times the calls it had in 1974 but only twice as many ambulances.

It has taken Hines nine minutes to arrive at Ridgell's wreck, but he isn't worrying about that now. He's gotten Ridgell's boyfriend out of the car. Now, he plans to bring her out on a backboard. He's already put a cervical collar on her to hold her neck still.

Ridgell's door is jammed almost shut, so Hines slides a backboard in on the passenger side and climbs into the car to sit on top of the board.

"I want you to take one leg out at a time," he tells her. "Turn around slowly. . . . Keep your back straight."

Hines guides Ridgell slowly backward, onto the backboard, as he backs out. Then he and EMT Jerusha Clements bring Ridgell out of the car and lower her to the ground.

Ridgell winces at the sun. Clements gives Ridgell her own sunglasses.

"Are you in pain?" Hines asks her.

"Not really," she says. "I just feel like I was jarred really bad."

But everyone wants to be sure. Hines will take Ridgell and her boyfriend to Lexington Medical Center.

The call for help is one of 11 that Hines and Clements will answer on this Friday. As day wears into evening, Hines and Clements will take two men to the hospital — one with chest pains and another who is so disoriented that bystanders call for help. They'll respond to a wreck at rush hour and wait as police break into the home of a woman who has broken her hip.

They'll write a medical report in each case.

As they answer call after call, they'll have no time for dinner. They'll have to try twice before they can refuel the ambulance without a call coming in.

They'll go four calls in a row without a chance to go to the bathroom.

Their average response time for the shift: 13.9 minutes.

Signal 80 in Swansea. At 4 p.m., the ambulance radio crackles.

"Unit 7 respond . . . code 3, signal 80."

A signal 80 means a person with chest pain. More serious is a signal 83: cardiac arrest.

with her parents. She had planned to be a nurse but likes to be "constantly moving."

"And I like working with people," she adds. "I'm very outgoing. As you can tell."

Clements has worked as an EMT for just five months, long enough for other crew members on C shift to nickname her "Jumanji," after the exuberant Robin Williams movie. When she works Saturday shifts, she comes

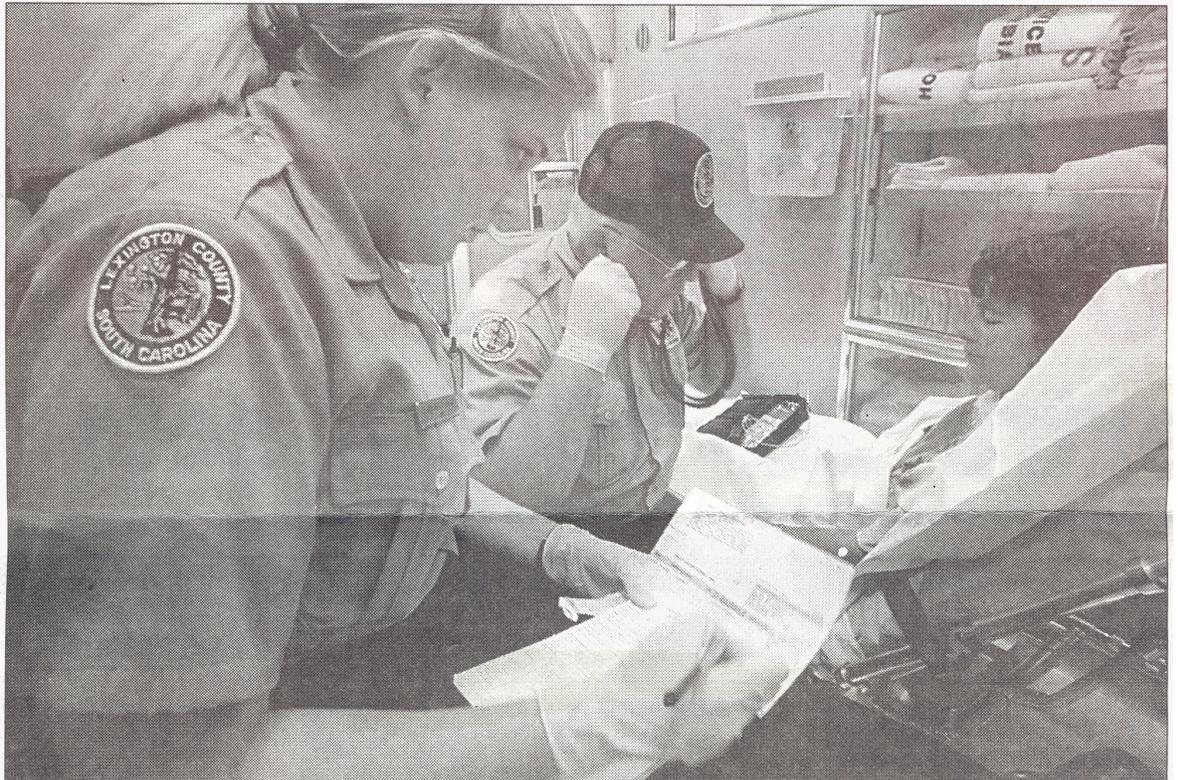
bumped her head in a minor fender-bender and a man with chest pains.

At 11:52 a.m., they get another call — in Irmo, far from the Cayce call area. A car has rear-ended a van carrying a prison work crew. The Irmo crew is calling in extra ambulances.

When they arrive at 12:06 p.m., the scene is abuzz with men in uniform: prisoners in brown work clothes, EMS workers setting up

in charge of EMS still is being studied. But Lexington County Council Chairman Bruce Rucker has said the council might have neglected EMS and might need to give the service more money.

Adding and staffing a single ambulance will cost the county about \$310,000. Hines and Chavis show theirs off: It has more than 200 pieces of medical equipment, from a defibrillator and leg splints to sterile burn dressings and intra-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELISSA LITTLE/THE STATE

Emergency medical technician Jerusha Clements records vital information in the back of the ambulance.

home at 7 a.m. Sunday morning and trades her steel-toed boots for high heels to wear to church.

The ambulance pulls into the Swansea care center 28 minutes after the call came in. It's hard to say that patient Colie Williamson Sr. was endangered by the wait, since he already had a doctor caring for him.

On the way back, Hines hooks Williamson up to a heart monitor, and checks his blood pressure and blood-oxygen levels.

"How long you been doing this?" Williamson asks.

"One year for the county, but 16 years as a paramedic. You'd think I'd be smart enough to get out, wouldn't you?"

Williamson once worked for Lexington County himself. "It's a good job," he tells Hines.

"I enjoy it, I really do," Hines says. "I love running calls. I couldn't work a day job."

The 'golden hour.' On many calls, a few minutes doesn't make a medical difference to the patient.

On others, it can be critical. That's why the county has developed a first-responder program, sending firefighters with basic life-

spine boards and getting out cervical collars, police directing traffic and Irmo firefighters helping the EMS crews.

The prisoners have no visible injuries, but the Department of Corrections wants them taken to the hospital as a precaution.

It will take three ambulances to take them there.

For the next hour, Lexington County will have seven ambulances to answer calls instead of its usual 10. Two crews will have to answer calls outside their normal boundaries.

Chavis and Hines take three

venous solutions made for infants. There are medications to treat allergic reactions and drug overdoses and sugar solutions to give to diabetics.

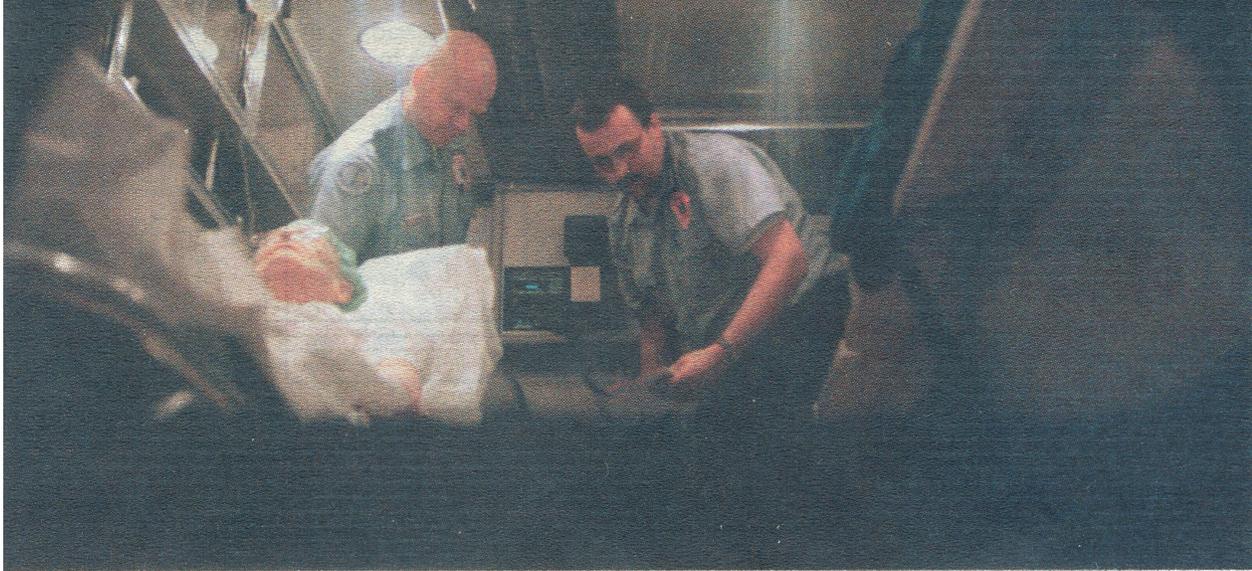
Hines and Chavis have used just about all of them.

"Kids are the hardest thing to run," Chavis says. "About all the paramedics have young ones at the house."

"I run them the same as I run adults," Hines says. "And then I fall apart afterwards."

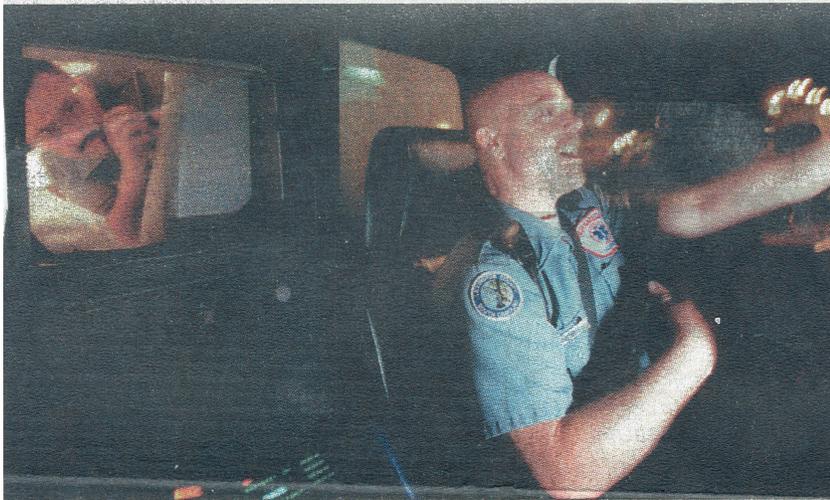
'Pleased to know you.' At 3:16 a.m., Chavis has been asleep for an





MELISSA LYTTLE/THE STATE

Fighting time, saving lives



Looking back through the ambulance cab window, top photo, paramedic Bill Hines and EMT Artie Chavis tend to a patient before leaving for the hospital. 'The back of this truck is a mini-emergency room,' Hines said. Chavis, above, at left, checks with Hines en route to the hospital.

What you can do in an emergency

EMS crews aren't the only ones who help save lives when someone is injured. Here are some of the ways you can make a difference in an emergency.

- Get out of the way. Pull to the right when an ambulance approaches. Don't move left — EMS workers are taught to pass you on the left. Don't cross an intersection in front of an ambulance.
- Learn first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Studies show that CPR given by bystanders, before EMS crews arrive, saves lives. The American Red Cross offers classes in first aid as well as child and adult CPR. Call them at (803) 540-1200 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays.
- Make sure your street address is clearly visible outside your home. If you live in a rural area or hard-to-find place, post written directions by your phone, so that you can tell emergency dispatchers how to get there even when you're panicked.

May 24, 1998 **Every minute counts for EMS**
— and every minute is counted

By LISA GREENE
Staff Writer

Lexington County paramedic Bill Hines arrives at the wreck to find Rebekkah Ridgell staring at the starburst crack made when her head hit the windshield.

For Ridgell, 19, this is her first wreck in her first car.

For Hines, a crisis in the life of a teen-ager is another day on the job. On this Friday, Hines is working a 24-hour shift in Cayce, leading Lexington County's busiest EMS crew.

These days, it's a job surrounded by controversy.

County Council members are talking about turning the EMS service over to Lexington Medical Center.

An audit criticized EMS for having its ambulances take too long to reach emergency scenes — at an average of 12.5 minutes. Ambulances in similar-sized South Carolina counties take just under eight minutes, on average, to arrive at the scene of an emergency.