

ALWAYS ON THE JOB

by Linda Owen



Gonzales with Chief Bratten

When he was four, Edward Gonzales told his family that he wanted to be a police officer like his dad. He still remembers how proud he was when his namesake Edward L. Gonzales II, a Corpus Christi motorcycle police officer, drove him to school on the motorcycle—and how excited the other kids were every time they saw his father in uniform. Edward also remembers his father frequently stopping to help motorists stranded on the side of the road, even though he was off-duty or in another part of the state. The senior Gonzales' philosophy: "Always help people. You might not be a mechanic, but you can fix a tire. You might not be a doctor, but you can always do something."

Perhaps that's why Officer Edward Gonzales III, now 35, was decorated this year for saving ten lives — at ten different times, all when he was off duty.

Gonzales, who once was police officer in Devine, Texas, has been with the police department at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio for a year. Recently his chief, Rosemary Bratten, gave him a plaque honoring his life-long commitment to saving lives. The university President and Vice President were present, as were local media, to hear that Gonzales was an officer who "goes beyond the call of duty."

Of those that Gonzales saved from certain death, four were drowning. Three were choking. Two had heart attacks. One was an attempted suicide.

Those he saved for the most part were strangers. Four were infants and two were senior citizens. There were others, too—numerous persons whom he stopped to help after witnessing terrible car crashes. In each case, he had to travel a mile be-

fore he could turn around, and he was still the first one on the scene.

"So many people don't want to get involved," Gonzales observes. "It's hard for me to understand how they can keep driving.

"I've also had people tell me, 'I'd never go out of my way to help someone who was drowning, especially if they're thrashing around. You could get into trouble and drown, too'."

Gonzales doesn't see it that way. "There's human life at stake," he says, "and that's more important than any situation."

Gonzales, who was once a lifeguard and certified in Advanced Water Safety, has rescued a surfer on South Padre Island, an intoxicated girl pushed into a swimming pool at a party, and an infant from the bottom of a pool. In each case, he used his lifeguard skills to clear their airways and resuscitate them.

Edward admits that there was a moment when he was afraid that the child could not be revived; but he doggedly continued with thirty heart massages and mouth to mouth. Just as the EMS arrived,

the baby started crying.

"Like Edward, every police officer should be ready to serve 24 hours a day, 7 days a week," said Chief Bratten. "In this field we all go out of our way to help people; but when the results are so outstanding, so many times, you start to look beyond the coincidental at the man himself."

Teenage-mother Arazelli Valdez and her mother Yolanda see Officer Edward Gonzales as a hero. On June 6, 2001, while Gonzales was visiting the beauty shop where his wife works, Valdez accidentally locked her infant in the hot car. It was at 1 p.m., on a day when the high was 101 degrees, which made it about 150 degrees in the car.

Officer Gonzales first noticed a young woman pacing back and forth in front of the beauty shop. Several times she went to peek inside a new Chevy Tracker, then she lingered on the sidewalk. At first suspicious that the woman was planning to steal the car, Gonzales went outside and asked if there was a problem. What he saw was a two-month-

"On The Job" — concluded

old baby strapped in the back seat of a locked automobile.

The area police had not dispatched help, saying instead to call a locksmith. Gonzales made two telephone calls himself, stressing that an infant was trapped in a hot car. After no response, he took action. First he tried breaking into the car several ways, but it had shatter proof windows and anti-theft doors. He also repeatedly pounded the back window with a horseshoe.

As 3-month-old Kayleen looked faint, Gonzales took a baseball-sized rock and pounded the side front window, cutting his hand repeatedly to break through the glass. When he grabbed the baby from the furnace-like heat, she had been in the car 45 minutes and was unconscious.

"I remember how tenderly he held the baby and how he ran to get her water," says Yolanda Valdez, the infant's grandmother. "We were all hysterical, but he was calm. He didn't seem to notice the blood dripping from his hand."

Witnesses say that Gonzales' goal was to prevent the infant from going into shock. He rubbed her tiny limbs, removed everything but Kayleen's diaper, put wet towels on her and placed her under a ceiling fan. In a few minutes, she began to cry.

The crisis was over— but not forgotten by Yolanda Valdez. She wrote a letter to Chief Bratten, praising Officer Gonzales and suggesting that he get a medal. "He obviously is 100% public servant," she wrote. "I thank God he was here when no one else knew what to do."

Undoubtedly there are lots of people who feel the same way. As early as high



Gonzales family ring

school, Gonzales' CPR training in a school Health Occupations course came in handy.

At 17, while doing volunteer work at an Emergency Room, Edward and his friends went outside on a break. Always observant, Edward noticed an elderly man stop bicycling, put his bike down on the sidewalk, and lay down. The other teens around laughed at the "old man for sleeping," but Gonzales, then a high school junior, said: "I think that man's having a heart attack."

The elderly man's heart literally stopped. There was only one doctor on duty, who detected no vital signs and said the man was dead. Since there were other emergencies, the doctor left, telling Edward to do CPR.



Gonzales patrols with bike or car

The teenager continued pushing on the chest, and the old man miraculously began to breathe again. Later the doctor said that Gonzales had saved the man's life.

That made an impact on young Gonzales — and it was the beginning of many years of dedication to "sustaining life."

Why didn't Gonzales go into the medical field, then? He admits that he considered it, but he realized that "everybody, not just the sick, need help at one time or another. It may be as simple as getting someone a cup of water or changing a tire — Or helping to stop the bleeding from a gunshot wound. There are lots of ways to help people." •

Edward Gonzales had wanted to be a policeman all his life, and that never changed.

When he graduated from the academy, his father and namesake, Edward L. Gonzales II, gave him his own academy ring to wear— a symbol of passing on law enforcement to his son. The senior Gonzales, now on medical disability after having three toes shot off by a burglar with a shotgun, told his son: "Always respect and honor the badge. I hope you will give the community lots of years of good service."

Officer Edward Gonzales, badge #309, hopes the same thing. Right now he can't wait to report to work where he serves a community of nearly 7,000 students. He does his rounds— sometimes by bike and sometimes in a patrol car — on the 70-acre campus, as well as in the San Antonio park and city properties included in their jurisdiction.

Gonzales also hopes that his son Alex will someday want to inherit the ring. Alex, now 4, was a near fatality himself when he was two-weeks-old. At the time, Gonzales and his wife Norma did not know that Alex was lactose intolerant. One night, the baby threw up some milk while asleep; it curdled and blocked his air ways. When Gonzales didn't hear Alex breathing, he literally jumped over his wife to get to the baby. By the time he reached the crib, Alex was wide-eyed and turning blue.

Norma says that Gonzales removed her from the bathroom because she was emotional and a distraction — "so he could do what he was doing."

Someday Alex will know that his father saved his life. Someday his grandmother and his uncle Javier will tell him that they saw his father use the Heimlich Maneuver twice — on an elderly woman choking on Chinese food, and a year later on a baby who had tried to swallow a chunk of meat the size of a ice cube.

"It doesn't take a super hero to do this— anybody can do it," says Gonzales. "The most important thing is not to lose control of the situation in your head," he advises. "If you're not prepared for it, then you're going to be in trouble. If you stay in focus, you'll be some good to somebody." •