

► **Wood's Ambulance, Gardner**

# Family to the rescue



From left: James A. Wood, president and CEO; Linda A. Wood, vice president; Jessica Smith, transportation manager; Jennifer Wood, general manager; and Jonathan Bartus, fleet and facility coordinator.

## Woods mix 60 years of personal care with cutting-edge medicine

BY LIVIA GERSHON

Special to the Worcester Business Journal

When Jennifer Wood's three-year old son started preschool recently, he had an unusual request. For show and tell, he wanted to bring an ambulance. So Jennifer, the general manager at Wood's Ambulance in Gardner, made it happen.

Showing off the kid-pleasing emergency vehicle at the preschool was an easy call, she said. Not only is it something the business does frequently for local schools, but mixing kids and business is a family tradition.

Jennifer remembers hanging out under her dad's desk as a kid, playing with envelopes. And when her dad, Wood's Ambulance President James Wood was young, the ambulances parked in the garage of his South Gardner home; he sometimes answered emergency calls that came right to the house.

"Still, to this day, I answer the phone on the first ring whether day or night," he said.

James' dad, Raymond, was the "quintessential entrepreneur," he says. In the 1940s and '50s, he ran a propane business, a Chrysler dealership, a school bus company and a garage. He also served on the board of Heywood Hospital, and when

hospital leadership started talking about outsourcing their ambulance service, he jumped at the chance, starting Wood's Ambulance in 1954.

### Few rules at the beginning

In those early years, there was little regulation in the ambulance business. The first aid that drivers learned was basically what was in the Boy Scout handbook, James said. He went out on his first call at 16.

The company has always worked to be at the forefront of best medical practices, getting employees EMT training as soon as it became available, later bringing in paramedics and resuscitation equipment. The company has pioneered the practice of having even basic-level EMTs carry Narcan, a drug used to stop heroin overdoses.

Just as important as the technical knowhow is the people who work at Wood's, Jennifer said.

"Anybody that works for this company, I would trust taking care of my child," she said.

Indeed, Jennifer's two young sons can often be found running through the hallways, she said. Their cousins might make an appearance too, since Jennifer's sister, Jessica Smith, works in the dispatch office. The family matriarch, James' wife, Linda, is semi-retired, taking care of her grandkids many days. But she still spends time at the office; Jennifer's husband is a mechanic in the garage.

In a different sort of business, it might be odd to spend eight hours a day with family and then see them in the off-hours. At Wood's, though, Jennifer said there's a sense of being part of an

extended family even for people who aren't blood relatives.

The company makes an effort to treat employees as family, encouraging everyone to find work hours that fit their personal schedules. Because Wood's covers a fairly small geography, employees tend to be close with others in the community too. Everyone gets to know the local residents with issues like mental health problems.

"They're our extended family," Jennifer said. "We kind of know their triggers and how to calm them down."

But that can make it especially hard when there's a death in that extended family, or when a call simply doesn't go as planned.

James helped provide seed money years ago to On-Site Academy, a local organization that helps rescue personnel recover from job-related trauma. When a crew has faced a difficult situation, Wood's gets help right away, getting an On-Site counselor to come in and help the affected personnel debrief.

"Every EMT ... obviously has some baggage," James said.

The business of ambulance services has changed over the years, with many fire departments adding emergency services. That has led three or four towns to stop using Wood's as their primary emergency response force over the past 10 to 15 years, James said. But Jennifer said the company is adapting.

### Branching out

Typically, she said, even fire departments that have their own ambulances will also contract with the company to provide backup, and Wood's is also finding new sources of business. It's increasingly working with area nursing homes to offer transportation for residents, and it's getting a 14-passenger mini-bus that can carry wheelchairs. It's broadening a "Home for the Holidays" program that takes people with special transportation needs to weddings, graduations and holiday celebrations.

Jennifer has also launched a separate business, Wood's EMS, that could provide a means to expand ambulance services into additional communities.

Like her grandfather, who juggled selling propane, repairing cars and running school buses with starting an ambulance service, Jennifer is confident about finding a business plan that works. She hopes her sons will join the family business, improving their community.

"You can make a difference in people's lives on their worst days." ■