



Crash Course

A year later, Grady Memorial EMT Tony Trimble reflects on the Bluffton University bus crash and questions the future of the embattled hospital.

TONY TRIMBLE HADN'T EVEN had time to pour his usual morning cup of coffee. He'd reported to his shift as a paramedic at Grady Memorial Hospital at 5:30 a.m. on March 2, 2007. The call came in at 5:35.

"We were told we had a bus wreck," says Trimble, forty-nine, a self-proclaimed "country boy" who still lives in his hometown of Jackson, in Butts County. "We didn't think much of it. We handle MARTA wrecks all the time." As he and his partner, Brian Sheplar, looped around I-75 in their ambulance trying to get close to the accident site, they learned that the situation was much worse than they'd anticipated. A charter bus carrying thirty-five people had crashed through a concrete barrier at the Northside Drive

exit, then plunged thirty feet to the southbound lanes below. The driver apparently mistook an exit ramp for a high occupancy vehicle lane.

Trimble, a paramedic with thirty-three years of experience, wasn't rattled. After all, the former Army medic and Green Beret who received his basic EMT license at sixteen had worked other major emergencies, including the 1996 Centennial Olympic Park bombing.

First to arrive on the scene below the overpass, Trimble and his partner pulled up and sprinted toward the shattered bus encircled by shards of glass. Trimble crawled inside in search of victims. "I always get recruited to get in the small spaces 'cause I'm so short," quips Trim-

ble in a thick drawl. "The front windshield was completely gone, so I crawled through. It was pitch black. I couldn't see in front of myself." Even by the dim glow of his flashlight, he could tell the scene was grim. "The driver and his wife were dead," recalls Trimble. "I saw a player lying on the floor with his arm trapped in the window frame. I talked to him a few minutes, then wrapped him up in a blanket. Then I worked my way to the back. I found another one who had a trapped leg. Another one was dead; he was trapped beneath the bus."

Trimble yelled out to those who were conscious that they had been involved in a serious accident and assured them help was on the way. He assisted those who could walk out of the bus and then went back in. "I was so proud of those young men, they were so composed," says Trimble. "There was no crying, no yelling. They handled everything so well." (He wouldn't find out until later that those on board were mostly members of Ohio's Bluffton University baseball team, en route to spring training in Florida.)

By this point dozens of fire trucks, police cars, and ambulances were on the scene. Even some of Grady's administrators and supervisors had been dispatched to ensure that all resources were being deployed. Trimble patrolled the scene making sure that every cog in this massive rescue machine was functioning as it should.

As Sheplar tended to the "walking wounded" in the makeshift triage area, Trimble, aware that critical moments were slipping by, commandeered a MARTA bus to take them to Grady, rationalizing that in this case it was better "to beg forgiveness than to ask for permission."

On the anniversary of this tragedy, many consider Trimble a hero. He shrugs off the assertion, insisting he was merely doing his job. Four young men on the team died on that chilly March morning, along with the bus driver and his wife. A fifth player died a week later. Talking about the event now, Trimble tries to focus on the positives, like the fact that thanks to the efforts of

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The Bluffton team bus crashed when the driver apparently mistook an exit ramp for an HOV lane.

dozens of first responders and medical personnel, twenty-eight survived.

Karen and Rob Berta, whose son, twenty-three-year-old Tim Berta, a student coach, was among the five players critically injured in the crash, say they will never forget Trimble's kindness. "They didn't think he [Tim] would make it, but the people of Atlanta and at Grady were absolutely phenomenal and helped pull him through," says Karen Berta, who spent six weeks in Grady's intensive care unit until her son was transferred to a hospital closer to their Michigan home. "He suffered a brain injury, but he's doing better every day, taking it one day at a time. We feel so fortunate to have him here."


Trimble's supervisor, Grady Emergency Medical Services supervisor Astria Benton, describes Trimble, who also works part time as a surgical intensive care nurse, as the consummate professional. "Tony always knows what to do. He's the kind of person that does what he needs to do, and he doesn't look for any gratitude when he's done," she says.

"You never see him get emotional; he always remains composed. He's a strong leader and an excellent teacher."

Trimble accepts that tough decisions are part of a job he loves, but he admits some of the memories from that day linger. Like when the team captain had to identify his deceased friends or when Trimble had the task of assigning a limited number of available ambulances to transport the injured. "There was a kid who had [gone into cardiac arrest] in the back of one of the trucks, and we had to pull him out because we needed that truck to transport someone else," says Trimble, a hint of sadness in his voice. "That was the most emotionally hard part for me. I had to tell his friend that we had done all that we could do."

The crash hit close to home for Trimble and his wife, Carol, because their sons—twenty-five-year-old twins, Jay and Alex, and twenty-one-year-old Matt—are close in age to many of the Bluffton baseball players. "It's definitely something I think about with

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this job. Life is fleeting," he says. "You never know when is the last time you'll see them. That's why when I walk out the door each day I tell them I love them."

Looking back on the Bluffton crash also ignites Trimble's strong feelings about the status of financially strapped Grady Memorial Hospital, where he has worked as a paramedic for twenty-six years. "If this hospital were to close or reduce its medical training and services, you would see a dramatic impact not only in Atlanta but in the state," says Trimble.

Grady, the region's only Level 1 trauma center, is the hospital where most major accident cases are routed. It's the hospital on call for Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, the Georgia Dome, and other major facilities. Grady, which also serves a large indigent population, is facing bankruptcy. The efforts of civic, business, social, and political leaders to address the funding crisis—a \$100 million shortfall that threatens to, if not close the hospital, at least reduce its services—remained unresolved at press time.

Berta, who spent weeks at her son's bedside in Grady's intensive care unit, agrees with Trimble. "I firmly believe that if this had happened in another part of the country and Tim hadn't gone to Grady Hospital, he and many others would not be alive today," she says. "This is probably the best place he could have ended up. I thank God that this happened only five minutes away from Grady. It's like a miracle."

Trimble's wife, a former Butts County magistrate judge who now works as a registered nurse at a medical center in Forsyth County, is also concerned about Grady's challenges. "There are services you can get at Grady that you can't get at any other hospital in the state. And I'm not just saying that because my husband works there." Trimble himself says, "Closing Grady will have a multigenerational impact across the state. That's somebody's father, mother, or child who will be dying if Grady is not there to save them." ■

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