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Dr. Michael Guttenberg – in Memoriam

Michael W. Dailey & Daniel I. Steinberg

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Dr. Michael Guttenberg – in Memoriam

Dr. Michael Guttenberg – an EMS physician, 9/11 responder, and dedicated advocate of collegiate EMS – passed away on October 17, 2017.

Michael W. Dailey, MD, FACEP, FAEMS & Daniel I. Steinberg, MD, FHM, FACP

Dr. Michael (Mike) G. Guttenberg gave a lecture at several conferences of the National Collegiate EMS Foundation (NCEMSF) entitled “9/11/01 Looking Back...Planning for the Future.” Mike knew more about the intricacies and long-term hazards of responding to the attacks at the World Trade Center than most – as the FDNY EMS Physician Fellow, he responded to the attacks and was on scene when the towers collapsed. He supported recovery efforts and remained as long as there was hope for rescues. On October 17, 2017, Mike paid the ultimate price for his service and dedication when he died at the age of 50 of complications associated with his work as an EMS physician at the World Trade Center.

Roots in Collegiate EMS

Mike was a leader in collegiate EMS who never forgot his roots. While at Brandeis University between 1985 and 1989, Mike rose to the position of Director of Brandeis Emergency Medical Corps (BEMCo). His tenure was a time of great development at BEMCo, which included updating its protocols, enhancing its reputation within Brandeis and the Waltham, Massachusetts community,

Michael W. Dailey, MD, FACEP, FAEMS is an Associate Professor of Emergency Medicine, Chief of Prehospital and Operational Medicine at Albany Medical College. He is a member of the JCEMS Editorial Board.

Daniel I. Steinberg, MD, FHM, FACP is the Associate Chair for Education & Residency Program Director in the Department of Medicine at Mount Sinai Beth Israel and Associate Professor of Medicine and of Medical Education at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. He is a former EMT with Brandeis University EMS.

increasing recruitment, and laying the groundwork for updating BEMCo’s response vehicle. As a student, Mike’s mentorship skills and generosity of spirit were well developed, as he coached dozens of BEMCo members to a high level of competency. He encouraged students to augment their on-campus experience by seeking part-time or summer jobs with ambulance companies outside Boston and in New York City, leveraging his own stellar reputation at the places he worked to help get his BEMCo members hired.

“As a student, Mike’s mentorship skills and spirit of generosity were well developed.”

Pursuit of Excellence in Emergency Care

Mike’s journey in EMS began with the Youth Squad at the Commack Volunteer Ambulance Corps (CVAC) at the age of 16. He remained involved with CVAC for the next 34 years, serving as youth squad president, crew chief, Chief of the Department and ultimately the Medical Director. During the early 1990s, Mike worked as a paramedic in New York City. He worked the 42F ambulance out of Mary Immaculate Hospital, as well as the BLS unit out of Jamaica Hospital. He loved to work Tour 1, which ran from midnight to 8 a.m., because it was the perfect combination of less-trafficked streets and plenty of action. Approachable, easy to be around, and interested in others, Mike related exceptionally well to the wide range of personalities found in NYC EMS. During this time, he acquired more mentees who he would guide for years on the streets of NYC. They also sought his guidance about career decisions, such as how to transition

from EMT to paramedic and whether or not to embark on the path to medical school.

After working as a paramedic, Mike decided to move further into medicine and become a physician. Following medical school at New York College of Osteopathic Medicine. Mike did his emergency medicine residency at the Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn, where he won a resident scholarship and served as chief resident. After residency, he was selected for the FDNY EMS Fellowship, one of the most selective in the country.

Remaining involved in EMS programs Mike went on to hold several management roles in emergency medicine. Ultimately, Mike worked for Northwell Health as medical director of clinical preparedness and director of the Center for Emergency Medical Services (CEMS). He was awarded the Physician of Excellence award by the Westchester County Regional EMS Council in 2008 and the Suffolk County Regional EMS Council in 2014 – possibly the first time any physician has won this award in more than one region.

Mike's commitment to NCEMSF was ongoing, as he was an enthusiastically anticipated speaker at the annual conference nearly every year while he was healthy. For his dedication, he was awarded NCEMSF's George J. Koenig, Jr. DO Service Award in 2014. He was also recognized by his physician peers with the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Northwell Health Emergency Medicine Service Line in March 2016 and the Advancing Emergency Care Award from the NYS American College of Emergency Physicians in 2014

Commitment & Perseverance

Mike developed pancreatic cancer at the age of 46, despite a healthy lifestyle and no prior risk factors. His diagnosis is attributed to Ground Zero illness - the health fallout experienced by many first responders and volunteers. Even after his diagnosis, Mike continued to work actively when he was able, staying involved in EMS for four years with a terminal diagnosis. Even after he started hospice, Mike was on his laptop firing off emails to members of CEMS –reassigning projects and upcoming presentations he would no longer be able to give.

In a statement released by Northwell, Dr. John D'Angelo, the Chief of Emergency Medicine and Mike's boss, said: "Dr. Guttenberg has been a leader in hospitals and emergency medical services organizations across

New York State. Above all, he was a dedicated physician, a leader in the emergency medicine field, and a mentor to many. We are thankful to have known Mike as a friend and a colleague. He committed his life to the service of others, setting a high bar for performance, even in the most difficult of situations."¹

Gatherings after Mike's passing were filled with both former and active NYC EMTs and paramedics who all told surprisingly similar stories of how generous and giving Mike was with his time and advice, and the many lessons he taught them. They cried and laughed, telling stories of their days in the street and the respect they had for Mike.

On a personal level, one of the co-authors (MWD) had the honor and opportunity to say goodbye to Mike the week before he died, discussing the legacy he was leaving behind and what we could all accomplish in his name. In particular, Mike was hoping that we could continue his work on EMS provider safety, focusing on the ever-present danger that exists with interfacility transfers of psychiatric patients. Having seen several EMS providers and patients suffer, he had been working on protocols and procedures that would allow for a safe transport without sacrificing the self-determination or independence of the patients. His love of EMS and professionalism came through right to the end, as with a weak voice he spoke passionately about the need to protect our brothers and sisters in EMS.

We want you to remember Mike as the guy who strived for excellence, but also battled when things got hard or when circumstances outside of his control presented themselves. He didn't put his head down, he didn't give up – instead, Mike always bolstered up the courage needed to push forward. It was truly an honor to know Michael Guttenberg and he will be missed.

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At Mike's request, a memorial fund has been established to benefit paramedics with aspirations to attend medical school. Please mail your donation to: Northwell Health Foundation, 2000 Marcus Ave., New Hyde Park, NY 11042. In the memo section of the check, please indicate that the gift is in memory of Michael Guttenberg.

Acknowledgments

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Author Affiliations: From Department of Emergency Medicine, Albany Medical College, Albany, NY, USA (M.W.D.); Department of Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, USA (D.I.S.); Department of Medical Education, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, USA (D.I.S.).

Address for Correspondence: Michael W. Dailey, MD, FACEP, FAEMS, Department of Emergency Medicine, Albany Medical Center, 43 New Scotland Ave., Albany, NY 12043, USA. E-mail: daileym@amc.edu

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