

Always the Good Samaritan

by Marjorie H. Dwyer

Dr. Theoharis C. Theoharides and his family were driving to a friend's cookout south of Boston last summer. They missed their exit and were making their way up I-95 when his wife, Efthalia Triarchou, pointed out a cloud of dust in the median strip. Dr. Theoharides, a Tufts faculty member, pulled over and ran with his medical bag toward the median divider.

As the dust cleared, Dr. Theoharides had his first look at a frightening scene. A four-wheel drive vehicle had flipped over. A middle-aged woman was pinned inside, her legs entangled in the steering wheel.

"I jumped on the hood of the car and with the heels of my shoes, broke the windshield. I got in the front seat, pulled her legs from the steering wheel, and then moved to the back seat and held her head steady while the people who had gathered outside uprighted the car. Then I pushed open the door and with both hands under her neck, directed the onlookers to pull her legs first out of the car. She was gray and not breathing; everyone thought she was dead," said Dr. Theoharides, associate professor of pharmacology and experimental therapeutics, biochemistry and psychiatry at the medical school.

"I straddled her body and did frantic CPR, while asking someone to pull her head back and squeeze her cheeks to keep her airways open. I yelled to someone to get the soft neck collar I carried in my bag. By then, about 10 minutes had passed, and she was still not breathing. A surgeon from New York and a police officer had stopped. I continued to do CPR on her chest, and the surgeon blew into her mouth.

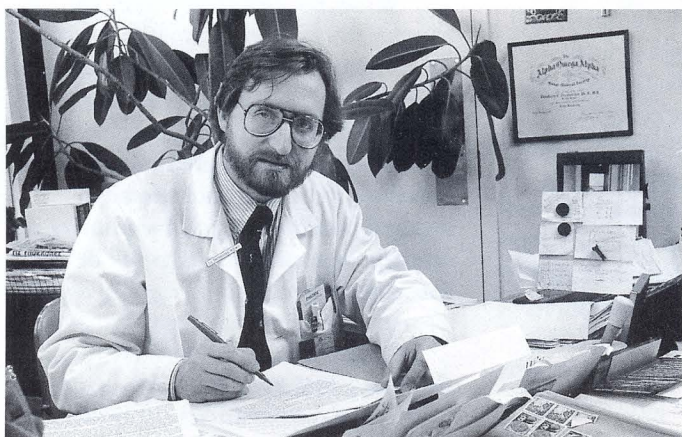


Photo by Educational Media

Dr. Theoharis C. Theoharides has aided injured motorists on numerous occasions.

"Her color began coming back. We started to get a pulse. In about 15 minutes, we knew she had come about," he said.

By then, paramedics, police cruisers and an ambulance had arrived. "Because of apparent extensive internal injuries, we felt it best to have her transported by ambulance to nearby Sturdy Memorial Hospital in Attleboro. From there she was airlifted by helicopter to the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester and since has recovered."

It was only after Dr. Theoharides and his family had arrived at the cookout that he realized "I still had blood on my hands and clothes. Three pairs of latex gloves had broken during the incident," he said. Then the reality of what he had done sank in. "It made me shiver to think that the vehicle could have exploded, and my family was only 50 feet away."

That wasn't the first time he has aided a motorist. Several months ago while driving in West Roxbury, Mass., he was the first on the scene after a woman had crashed her car into a tree. He pulled her from the wreckage and rendered medical aid until an ambulance arrive. His family again watched from their car nearby. Again the patient survived.

For the two years that Dr. Theoharides commuted between Tufts and Yale, where he was on the faculty, he stopped at least six times to assist at accidents. "Once a state trooper asked if I was American because most Americans worry about the way people sue and are afraid to stop."

A native of Greece, Dr. Theoharides emigrated in 1968 as a freshman at Yale, where he earned multiple degrees, including his Ph.D. and M.D. "The Greek spirit takes pride in taking care of people," he said. He often assists Greeks flown to Boston for medical care.

It was while working at Yale that Dr. Theoharides decided to pursue a medical residency in his spare time while on the Tufts faculty. He completed it just last year. "To be a good pharmacologist and teacher, you must know how the whole body works. If you don't, you're missing the boat," said Dr. Theoharides, who has received eight teaching awards from Tufts medical students.

A favorite story he tells students occurred in 1986 in London. He went to a hospital for treatment of an ankle problem. While in the radiology waiting room, a woman was wheeled in for an X-ray. Five minutes later he heard her screaming, and the orderly came out yelling for help. Dr. Theoharides rushed in and saw that the woman was having a grand mal seizure and had lost consciousness. He went to work, securing the airway and administering intravenous Valium. The woman regained consciousness.

"When it was all over, the medical staff asked 'Who are you?' I said, 'I'm here to have an X-ray taken.' Everyone laughed. I was treated like a prince after that," he said. "Things happen instinctively. You don't even stop to think you're not a staff physician at this place."

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