

Insight

How Tina Turner saved lives in the town of Tara



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Inspiration from an unexpected source reduced late-night car accidents in this remote Queensland community.

IT was 3am on a Sunday morning in the operating theatre of Tara District Hospital, sometime in the spring of 1978. As I placed a suture, the radio announcer's voice gave way to the energy, rhythm and dynamics of Tina Turner and *Nutbush City Limits*.

A call had interrupted my sleep around two hours earlier, with a request from the police that I proceed to the scene of a single-vehicle accident about 15km from town on the road to Dalby.

At that time, Tara was a little one-doctor country town on the Darling Downs of Queensland, with a population of 1300, servicing a rural shire of around 5000. Less than two years from graduation, I'd accepted the position of medical superintendent of the hospital with the right of private practice. I knew everyone in town.

Throwing on clothes, I splashed water on my face then set out. It was not long before I saw the flashing lights of the police car and ambulance reflected by trees overhead.

The teenage female passenger had been thrown from the vehicle and was conscious but complaining of severe chest pain, with laboured breathing and a rapid, feeble pulse.

There was no evident visible source of blood loss, supporting the likelihood of internal bleeding. With help from

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the two police officers, the ambulance officer had already moved her onto a stretcher, prudently managing for a suspected cervical-spine injury.

The driver had a scalp wound, but in spite of his agitation, he appeared to have escaped serious injury. The ambulance proceeded directly to the hospital with the young man up front and the stretcher patient in the back, attended by me, with oxygen and IV fluids running as rapidly as could be achieved through a cannula in each forearm.

Back at the hospital, the stretcher patient was X-rayed to exclude pneumothorax then returned to the ambulance – the dextrose-saline having been replaced with O-negative uncrossmatched blood – and despatched, attended by a nurse, for a 90-minute journey to Toowoomba General Hospital. On arrival, the patient would be treated for a ruptured spleen, fractured ribs and a fractured cervical spine – fortunately without any spinal cord injury.

Now I was in the operating theatre, suturing the full-thickness laceration to the scalp of her boyfriend. The radio was playing quietly in the background.

Sitting on the theatre stool, assisted by the hospital matron and going through the motions of suturing, my mind was wandering, as minds do in an operating theatre at 3am when the adrenaline has subsided and a semblance of order has been restored.

I was musing on the pattern of what seemed to be a recurring weekend experience. I would sleep restlessly,



waiting for the phone beside my bed to signal another single-vehicle accident on the Dalby road.

There were a couple of hotels in Tara, but there was no regular entertainment, and young people needed entertainment. They could travel, and travel they did. Then, after the trip, the entertainment and the alcohol, they would head for home. Most did not fall asleep at the wheel. Some did. Some did not survive.

As the lyrics and rhythm of *Nutbush City Limits* shattered my 3am musings, an idea was born. My mind wandered to Nutbush and a young Anna Mae Bullock...

"You go to the fields on weekdays.
And have a picnic on Labor Day.
You go to town on Saturday..."

That was it! In Nutbush, you go to town on Saturday – and I just knew that, in Nutbush, that would involve music and dancing.

An idea inspired by Tina Turner in the early hours of a Sunday morning materialised during the next few weeks into a reality. A high-quality Garrard dual turntable, a 500-watt amplifier and a formidable pair of speakers were the basic hardware. We even purchased disco lights.

Some 42 years later, I remember the first night as if it

were yesterday. I remember the opening track by Dragon – *April Sun in Cuba* – with its powerful, measured, punching rhythm. And the room exploded with energy when I turned up the volume for *Nutbush City Limits*.

The venue was the local golf club, and following its debut, Thunderbolt Disco provided entertainment every Saturday night until 1am. Once a month, we would bring out a live band from Toowoomba or Brisbane and they would play until the sun came up.

It was always packed, and after just a few weeks, when I had recouped my costs, I handed the disco over to a young DJ – a teenage electrical apprentice with a green Sandman panel van. I moved on from Tara five years later, but Thunderbolt Disco carried on, seemingly with a life of its own, for more than 20 years.

Significantly, after the disco's debut there were no more calls on my phone to attend a Saturday-night accident on the Dalby road, fatal or otherwise.

Thank you, Tina. You may never have heard of the township of Tara, but I think you probably saved more lives there than I did. I will always be grateful for your inspiration. ●

Editor's note: Tina Turner turned 81 on 26 November this year. Happy Birthday, Tina!