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Your Vehicles are our *First Priority*

First Priority has become a nationwide leader in emergency and specialty vehicles





First Priority continues its mission to become a national power in the manufacturing, remounting, sales and service of emergency vehicles, command vehicles, conversions, electric-energy school buses and so much more.

■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

The can-do attitude of First Priority Global can be seen in the tactical vehicle it proudly crafted for a large metropolitan policy agency's K9 special forces unit.

The innovative fortitude spawned from First Priority Emergency Vehicles inspired building an ambulance into a mobile paramedic training unit for a New Jersey college that wanted to start an EMT degree program recently.

First Priority's creative genius has also manifested in the conversion of an ATV for a fire department to fit through tight spaces like a city parking garage, where an emergency vehicle or fire apparatus might be too big to respond.

Unparalleled expertise flows through every bed, box and chassis of the First Priority Emergency Vehicle facilities in Manchester, Flanders, the Carolinas, the Midwest and even all the way to California. This is how First Priority Emergency Vehicles has segued into First Priority Global and First Priority GreenFleet.

In March, GreenFleet announced a partnership with the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District to

put 29 electric school buses into service, the largest-ever U.S. deployment of zero-emission, extended-range vehicles of its kind, and an example of the moxie that has planted First Priority on the leading edge of emergency and specialized vehicle manufacturing, refurbishing, sales and service.

At the heart of First Priority are the impassioned experts and technicians who make First Priority the best in the world. They carry on the mission their beloved patriarch Robert Freeman, who passed away suddenly this past Dec. 29, began when he started the company 19 years ago. He nurtured this every day, walking around the shop each morning, greeting each of them by name and asking about their families. It's a tradition Chairman and CEO Alex Cherepakhov respectfully upholds as a core principle for the company's growing global impact.

First Priority continues to operate under the mantra that every part of every ambulance, fire apparatus, emergency vehicle, command vehicle and electric and extended-range medium-duty vehicle, whether it is manufactured, remounted, refurbished, converted or serviced, must work correctly every time because it's a mechanism to help save somebody's life,



Robert Freeman

make lives better and even make the world a better place.

“There’s certainly something to be said for going on 20 years of surviving the wars,” Cherepakhov asserts. “Our people are industry professionals, and for those customers who want a little bit more of an ability to customize their products, we have an ability to deliver across several platforms to create vehicles that first responders and municipalities can be proud of using.”

In the beginning

From a three-bay garage serving ambulances in Asbury Park in the mid-1990s, First Priority has grown to become global with operations and products running in 20 states serving hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Emergency Medical Services (EMS), fire departments, law enforcement agencies and municipalities. To put into context how First Priority has gone from a family-owned corner store to a corporate power built on a family culture producing some of the most complex vehicles on the roads, it helps to go to the shop floor.

“We have amazing first responders who put themselves in harm’s way at a moment’s notice, so it’s our job to give them the best advantage we can,” explains Ked Rudnicki, Production Manager of First Priority’s Flanders operations. “We feel personally responsible for that.”

Or to get perspective about why First Priority continually is entrusted with such high-level jobs as customizing vehicles for Gov. Christie’s detail, let’s put in a call to the sales department.

“Our success comes from our attention to detail and our knowledge about working for our customers from their point of view,” submits Vice-President Greg DeForge, who has been with the company for nearly 13 years. “It goes back to knowing what the end-user equipment feels like and what the end-user



A photo of the original First Priority facility in Asbury Park hangs in the shop in Manchester.

needs to accomplish the mission, and not just selling a car to get from Point A to Point B.”

Or to understand why First Priority received a call from NASA the other day inquiring about a build, or is pioneering manufacturing of green and clean municipal and emergency vehicles, insight comes from a tour of the facilities with the professional who orchestrates everything from soup to nuts.

“Part of the conversation we have – part of our expertise – is that we want to guide the customer toward the correct vehicle, whether the vehicle is an Emergency Service Unit, a light rescue or a customized, hand-crafted conversion,” advocates Trevor Foster, National Sales Coordinator for First Priority Global. “We don’t want a customer to say, ‘Show me three trucks and let me pick one.’ We want to understand their use model and their mission for how they plan to use the vehicle, which then helps us design a vehicle for their specific goals and objectives. And we can do that for any department, anywhere in the U.S.”

About Bob

Bob Freeman responded to a call with the Roselle Fire Department back in the days when the standard turnout gear did not include SCBA. The smoke billowed, and the exposure left Bob with a lung condition that forced him to retire from both the department and the Roselle First Aid Squad. And as unfortunate, even discouraging, as that turn of events may have been, it might have sent First Priority’s wheels in motion to save thousands of lives and serve thousands of those in need.

He rebounded to follow up his Bachelor’s of Science in Fire Science Technology from Jersey City State College by earning a Master’s in Public Administration from Rutgers Graduate School of Management. As the path continued to become the Director of Emergency Medical Services at UMDNJ Hospital managing New Jersey’s largest pre-hospital care system, it eventually manifested into



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one of those defining moments.

“Bob would tell the story that in the middle of the night, if you were operating a pump panel, pulled the handle and water didn’t come out that bad things would happen,” DeForge recalls. “We knew the nature of what we were selling had to be tip-top and response-ready at all times. Bob built that from the top down.”



But it’s the stories his charges tell that reveal what Bob built at First Priority, and there’s almost a where-were-you-when-you-met Bob homage that peels back the true legacy he perpetuated.



Divine intervention might be a more apt description if you ask Rudnicky, who met Bob on Christmas Eve 2012, right after the company Christmas party concluded. He drove two hours to Manchester in a snowstorm, and that prompted a relationship during which Rudnicky would hear from Bob every morning at 6 a.m. and every night at 9 p.m.



“He just wanted to know how everything was working out that day,” Rudnicky imparts. “The way he walked around every morning saying hi to us was not just to



encourage the staff, but to challenge us to bring our ideas forward. I think it’s great that Alex does the same thing, which is also a way to honor Bob.”

Foster starts the tour of the Manchester shop at a picture of the original Asbury Park location and dissertates on Bob’s career. He notes that Bob’s master’s thesis led to the generation of

the New Jersey Medevac program, and admires how Bob had so many options after the health-forced retirement. “He didn’t have to stay with it, but he decided to drive it,” Foster states. “He wanted to have products that represented his passion. He lived and breathed it.”

Jay Campbell, Production Manager in Manchester, recalls why he left a job with a competitor after 26 years to come to First Priority:

“The way he treated employees and the way he treated customers,” Campbell credits. “He always put customers up on a pedestal. And employees the same thing. You just wanted to work for this guy.”

A hallmark of First Priority certainly has been the people who want to work there, and a walk through the shop encounters so many employees who have been there 10, 15, 20 years, or more. Tom Cramer came to work for Bob at 21 years old and has been an employee for half his life. He is one of the many who refer to Bob as a father and/or mentor, and Cramer believes Bob built more than a company.

“He created a brand that we provide with excellence,” Cramer reflects. “You don’t see people stay with a company for so many years if they are not happy here. That says a lot about Bob, and Alex has carried that on.”

Cherepakhov, too, recalls his first meeting with Bob. It came in Beijing when they were working on an Asian transaction, and they quickly realized their similar interests. But something more drew Alex to Bob, something that has drawn in so many customers and employees.

“He was a phenomenal orator. He could tell stories that absolutely grab you,” Cherepakhov expresses. “He had the ability to inspire people at levels throughout, from the guy on the floor cleaning up to the CEO of some company we were trying to get a large contract with. He could create narratives to make that person remember the conversation.”

How they do what they do

Step inside the office of Production Engineer Henry Piller to track the current state of First Priority circa 2017. Recently promoted from his role as Parts Manager, Piller was the guy Bob once came to after seeing a biomedical storage cabinet on the internet and asked if he could build something similar. First Priority now offers one so adaptable that it can refrigerate the inside of a vehicle with a unit that has no moving parts.

Another capture could be a check of the daily industry headlines. On April 4, emergency vehicle manufacturer Demers Ambulances announced that the First Priority Emergency Vehicles South, a division of First Priority Global, will represent its product line in the state of Georgia. The expansion of market share in the southeast defines the significance of First Priority’s core competencies in emergency vehicles and conversions.

Still another definition comes by the numbers. The company ranks among the top five independent dealers and manufacturers in the U.S. for Emergency Medical Service, Municipal Conversion and Commercial Electric Vehicles, and it is supported by the largest independent commercial electric vehicle service network in the country.

Additionally, the company distributes and services KME Fire Trucks as its No. 3 dealer in the U.S. And it’s fast on its way to becoming one of the top conversion specialists with the way First Priority is building complex command vehicles for law enforcement agencies. That, of course, is in addition to being the argest independent” ambulance remount group in the country.

“We like to do the cutting-edge things, things that other peo-



PHOTO BY JIM CONNOLLY

Trevor Foster, National Sales Coordinator for First Priority Global, shows the quality customers get in a remounted vehicle.

ple haven't tried," reasons Piller. "We try to customize everything we do. We try to deliver something to the customer they wouldn't otherwise get."

That includes after-sales service on a vehicle First Priority delivers, which does not wane one bit as soon as you drive it off the lot; it lasts as long as the vehicle. As DeForge notes, "We take care of them beyond whatever warranty the manufacturer provides."

One of the famous remount stories in company history tells of the Long Island Community Hospital truck that was severe-

ly damaged on 9/11. First Priority repaired, refurbished, remounted and then resold the vehicle.

That's all part of the customer experience designed to position First Priority as every agency's first phone call, according to Rudnick. It's not unusual for the design staff to get involved with a project before the sales team. Quite simply, the way the company continues to evolve its current state and make headlines results from keeping an eye out for the next hot-button development.

"Everybody here has the opportunity to contribute," Rudnick adds. "Two-thirds of our staff are firefighters or EMTs. We have chiefs, EMT's and firefighters working here. Many times when you see a tragedy on the news and see the vehicles we produced helping the people, we take a lot of pride in that."

The number that will always matter most to First Priority, though, is the number of repeat customers. Pride, communication and customer interaction account for much of that. But the market differentiator that might be the bedrock of First Priority's way of doing business, especially in the emergency vehicle realm, requires every member of the company to take their service personally.

"One of the things we try to instill in all our technicians is to be your own quality controller," Piller emphasizes. "Ask yourself, 'When you put something together, would you want that in your ambulance? Is that acceptable to you?'"

So this is how the magic happens, and it's not unreasonable to define the current state of work in First Priority's emergency vehicle and conversion operations as just that. Making magic goes back to days when the technicians converted a used Police Crown Vic into a Chief Command Vehicle.

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Production Engineer Henry Piller show a photo of the first truck First Priority ever built.

Now, First Priority is capable of turning a Sprinter Van into that vehicle for the K9 tactical team. The design facilitated four dogs and four officers with capacity to work up to 48-hour shifts for counter-terrorism or at events like the Presidential Inauguration or the Boston Marathon.

Maybe it's more than magic. Here, a basic conversion is taking the inside out of a van, stripping it down to the bare bones and crafting an electrical system specific to the vehicle's needs and requirements. A slightly more detailed job is making a completely

customized paramedic unit out of a pickup truck.

Seeing a First Priority conversion in progress can be like watching an episode of extreme makeover. On fast forward. Augment the box with cabinets customized on the premises, add external cameras and flat-screen monitors, equip it with a generator and canopy, and – like magic – instant command center.

“Not a lot of people can do these jobs the way we can do them because our staff that operates that division is well-entrenched in the community and trusted by the end-users,” Cherepakhov declares. “Some of our more complex vehicles are in demand from agencies in New York City and many other municipalities, and we are continuing to gain market share in that arena.”

The future is now

There is no ending to this story; it just keeps evolving. That's always been the company mission: If an agency or an organization has a concept, the design team and craftsmen take it and refine it. “If it's on wheels, it can result in us being able to design a vehicle,” Rudnicky cheers.

And so as First Priority always looks to the future, it does so with another of its core principles 19 years in the making.

“Always on a learning curve,” Cramer assures.

Here is where that curve is leading:

Expanding markets for conversions and remounts through initiatives like First Priority South will be the most fundamental approach to helping save even more lives throughout the country. That's in addition to the customers who already come from as far away as the Midwest to have vehicles built like the emergency unit Indiana University recently commissioned.

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fit from the goal to increase operational efficiencies to deliver across more platforms. Consequently, Cherepakhov expects a top priority to be increasing the First Priority dealer network throughout much of the U.S.

Factor in the actions and aspirations in developing using of clean energy to run fleet vehicles like the order for electric school buses in California, and the grass truly seems greener for First Priority. Developing pure electric and extended-range technology through First Priority GreenFleet should open up all kinds of possibilities, including deploying it for use with emergency vehicles.

“We have been in discussion with some of the largest fleets in the world about what’s next for them,” Cherepakhov verifies. “We’re working on the cost-benefit analysis for the next development of GreenFleet rolling out both electric and extended-range medium duty vehicles, and we’ve spent some time working on the requirements for electric and range extended ambulances.”

The focus for GreenFleet is squarely on providing zero-emission commercial vehicles that have the lowest cost of ownership, substantially reduce maintenance costs and improve operational performance. But there is no losing sight of the vision to create an operating structure that enhances all the attributes of the family-owned culture that has enabled First Priority to serve its customers so successfully for so many years.

“The product mix we are developing has a great deal to do with the legacy Bob left us the past 19 years,” Cherepakhov reiterates. “We are looking forward to taking that legacy to the next level of a national brand and continue to serve the community First Priority has always cared so much about.



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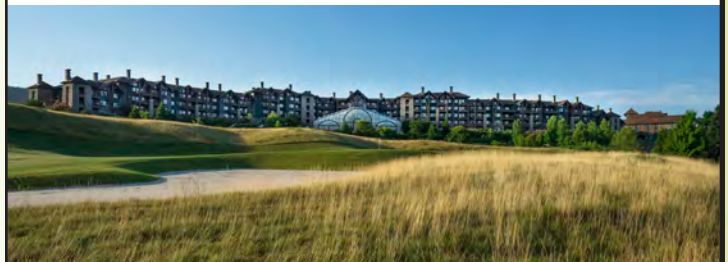
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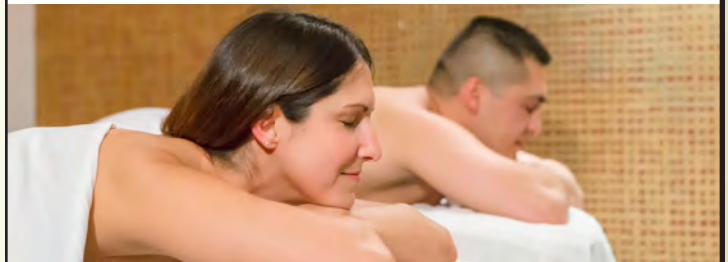
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