

flying to the rescue

THIS HELICOPTER RESCUE SERVICE IN THE HEART OF QUEENSLAND DOESN'T MISS A BEAT WHEN IT COMES TO SAVING LIVES.

AS THE CEO of the Capricorn Helicopter Rescue Service (CHRS) in Queensland, Kay Becker has been trained to remain unflappable and focused in a crisis, and not to let things she sees affect her. But some incidents stay in her mind long after the event.

"A little boy was out fossicking with his dad at a quarry when a big rock fell on him. I remember every moment of that incident so clearly — the hospital gates being swung open, the speed and intensity everyone was working at — but in the end he didn't survive.

"That was five years ago, but I still think about him," she says. "He was only seven. Everyone did everything they could. It was just one of those absolute tragedies."

Of course, for every tragedy there are many happy endings. The Rockhampton service works alongside the Royal Flying Doctor Service in central Queensland, going wherever a plane can't land — in the scrub, on the roadside or at sea. It is called out at least once a day.

"It's incredibly satisfying work," the 40-year-old says. "I worked in finance, for a big bank and then for a union, but you can't beat the feeling you get when people you've helped come back to say 'thank you'.

"You realise no amount of money is worth your health. When the crew's been out at a difficult job and everything goes to plan, you come back with this big grin on your face and say, 'Yes!'"

CHRS is a community-based, non-profit service that covers 320,000 square kilometres. The service is free of charge, even though it costs around \$4500 an hour to fly the American Sikorsky S-76 helicopter. It has the same medical facilities as the Flying Doctors and helps in search and rescues, and fire and flood emergencies.

Kay, who grew up on a cattle station south-west of Rockhampton, says the majority of call-outs are road accidents, followed by farm and mining incidents.

"Most of the accidents used to be during the holidays when the grey nomads would roll their caravans, but that's really declined," she explains.

"Instead, what's increased are accidents caused by fatigue — mining contractors who finish a shift and then think they can drive through the night on the long straight road to Brisbane.



"We can retrieve someone directly from a scene. Once we had to cut a helipad into thick scrub with a chainsaw to reach a victim but we were still able to get in quickly. The injured person need not be moved unnecessarily, and we can get straight in and out."

The three pilots, four crew, two engineers and three admin staff based at Rockhampton Airport have formed strong bonds. "Our work is high risk," Kay says. "We're a small team and we can't afford not to work as one."

CHRS is funded by the Queensland Department of Emergency Services and private sponsors. Kay's role includes raising about \$1.5 million a year; the latest drive aims to raise \$1 million via payroll deductions.

"I see many people in the worst moment of their lives say 'thanks' just as they are being wheeled from the helicopter to the waiting ambulance," Kay says.

"Some are people I know. I have friends who've suffered snakebites, horse falls or motorbike incidents — and before they're carried onto the helicopter, they've asked the crew, 'Is Kay going to be there?'"

To learn more about CHRS, or to support its fundraising, call (07) 4922 9093 or visit www.chrs.org.au.