

With decades of experience, Bluebonnet's senior linemen — James Jordan (alternate), Gary Barabas, Kenny Roland and Jeff Hohlt — achieved a competitive feat that earned them the title of best in Texas. Their paths to life on the lines, and the heartbreaking events before and after their championship win, give new meaning to a line worker's creed: One for all and all for one.

# The Brotherhood

Their profession is dangerous and their bonds are unbreakable. But for this team of Bluebonnet linemen, life's toughest test was only a heartbeat away.

By Janet Wilson

**F**or a sliver of a second, there was silence. Then the words from the loudspeakers rang out.

Three new champions leapt to their feet. High-fives and hearty cheers gave way to shrieks of joy and raucous shouts that rippled like a wave through the crowd of several hundred. Despite aching muscles, the men bounded up the stage, their own joyous hollering adding to the din.

Gary Barabas, Kenny Roland and Jeff Hohlt had just proved they were the best electric linemen in the big state of Texas. And they did it in the senior age group — 45 and older — at the annual Texas Lineman's Rodeo. It's the Lone Star State's version of the Olympics for electric line workers and they had won gold for Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, a first for the co-op in that prestigious event.

During the day, the trio had put their cumulative 85 years of experience to the test. They scrambled to the top of unelectrified power poles to demonstrate how to rescue hurt colleagues. They tag-teamed to hoist equipment and restore mock outages. They raced against judges' timers to repair or replace heavy equipment, simulating tasks they do daily.

Bluebonnet's senior linemen team had just showed the professional excellence that comes from decades of work on the lines.

Under the tall pecan and oak trees at Nolte Island Park along the Guadalupe River outside Seguin, they held their shiny 2½-foot trophy aloft. There was no end to

their infectious grins.

No one had any idea that day — July 19, 2014 — that this winning brotherhood would never compete together at the Texas rodeo again.

Things were going to change, in dramatically unexpected ways. Life was going to turn triumph into turmoil and loss.

## Kinship in dangerous work

There are an estimated 117,670 line workers nationwide. The 80 at Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative help keep power flowing to more than 71,000 Central Texas homes, businesses, schools and churches in a 3,800-square-mile area that stretches from Austin's eastern edge to less than 100 miles from Houston.

Electric line work is routinely listed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor as one of the top 10 most dangerous jobs in America. Bluebonnet linemen typically work around lines carrying 25,000 volts of electricity — often 30 or 40 feet in the air. A single

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Joe Stafford illustration  
from photos by Sarah Beal and  
Jay Godwin

After four decades on the job, Jeff Hohlt, right, continues to do what he loves — work in the field with fellow line workers, including Obed Guajardo, left. Here, he helps install underground lines in Brenham in February. (Sarah Beal photo)



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misstep or a failed piece of safety equipment could be fatal.

Like firefighters and police officers, line workers are first responders. If the power goes out, they go out. These often unseen wizards of the wires work in harsh and dangerous conditions — downpours, lightning storms, hurricanes, heavy winds, floods, wildfires and icy blasts. They race to restore electricity — and our comfort — as fast as possible.

Some consider them the rock stars of the utility industry, but the lineman brotherhood doesn't seek the limelight. Like firefighters, they don't work alone. They have one another's trust and respect, and that keeps them going. It's a kinship forged in a life-or-death job, day after day, month after month, year after year.

Because they put their lives in one another's hands, the bonds and friendships that form among them can become unbreakable. They live the slogan "one for all and all for one."

Safety is paramount in the Bluebonnet culture and one of the cooperative's six foundation values. Safety training is ongoing, and not just for line workers. At Bluebonnet, regular safety meetings are mandatory and every employee learns how to use CPR to save a life.

Like so many in the electric utility industry, Bluebonnet's Jeff Hohlt has a personal motto: "Everyone goes home at the end of the day."

### 'He wasn't breathing'

Jeff was a teenager in 1977 when he got his first job in the utility industry. He was a lineman's helper with the Lower Colorado River Authority, the primary wholesale power provider in Central Texas. He joined Bluebonnet just months later when the co-op took over LCRA's Brenham-based operations.

Jeff grew up in Brenham, in Washington County, and never left. He learned to climb power poles before there were trucks with hydraulic buckets to lift a line worker into the air. When he was 21, he became a lineman.

He and his wife, Pam, raised two daughters, Kayla and Hannah, and a son, Dylan.

More than four years ago, on Christmas night in 2013, the family was together and had just returned home from a holiday celebration. Pam, Jeff and their daughters went to bed around 10:30 p.m.

Jeff was thirsty. He sat up, swung his feet to the floor, but collapsed back onto the bed.

"He wasn't breathing," Pam said.

She cried out to 21-year-old Hannah, who was trained in CPR. Hannah performed chest compressions for a couple of minutes to keep her dad alive until Washington County EMS arrived.

"They shocked his heart four times," Pam said.

The emergency crew stabilized Jeff and transported him to St. Joseph Hospital in Bryan.

The diagnosis: sudden cardiac arrest — when the heart suddenly stops beating and blood stops flowing to the brain and other vital organs. Death can occur in minutes.

Against all odds, Jeff was alive, thanks to Hannah and the rapid EMS response. Hannah was later awarded a prestigious American Red Cross Certificate of Merit — the organization's highest lifesaving honor — for her actions.

A defibrillator was placed in Jeff's chest by doctors in Bryan. After three days in the hospital, Jeff returned home to a low-sodium diet and daily exercise. He went to the gym and walked on a treadmill. Winter faded, and he and Pam walked the neighborhood together, slowly increasing their time and distance.

A stoic man, Jeff loved being a lineman. He had risen through the ranks to become a supervisor over crews that built electric lines to new homes and businesses, and restored power during outages. He was a respected adviser, mentor and friend at Bluebonnet.

By mid-March, Jeff was back on the job. He had lost 50 pounds, was walking 3 miles a day and doing resistance training with weights. He knew some people doubted he could return to work, but he was up for the challenge.

He kept one secret from his cardiologist. He was determined to compete in the 2014 Texas Lineman's Rodeo in July.

And he planned to win.

### A natural leader

Officially he was Kennedy C. Roland (named for President John F. Kennedy), but everyone knew him as Kenny. He grew up in Lockhart and played football, basketball, and ran track — a natural athlete. But what really drew people to Kenny was his ear-to-ear smile and infectious laugh that bounced off walls and tickled everyone within earshot.

He was a teenager when he got a job at Bluebonnet in 1980 in Lockhart and started from the ground up — literally. Kenny was a novice utility worker, meaning he stayed on the ground and supported co-workers climbing poles. He handed up equipment, ran errands and did whatever he was asked to do until he had the experience and know-how to climb poles himself.

Kenny wanted to be one of those rock star linemen.

In 1982, Kenny could often be found two-stepping and jitterbugging at Footloose, a San Marcos nightclub. That's where he met Cathy Howshan. This dancing, laughing Texas man

impressed the young woman from Massachusetts. He was sporting his favorite colors: red, white and black. He wore red-and-white glasses, a black tie with white polka dots, an argyle sweater vest, pinstriped slacks and red-and-white wingtips. And he drove a 1962 red-and-white Chevy.

Cathy, who was attending Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University), remembers every detail.

"He was an awesome dancer," she said. "All the girls wanted to dance with Kenny."

They dated off and on, but got serious in 1996. Kenny proposed to Cathy while they sat on the front porch of the house he had built in Lockhart, the house they made their home. Their daughter, Kennedy Cecelia Roland, was born in 2005. Kenny adored her. "Our little angel baby," Cathy remembers.

Kenny loved life, his family and his job. When he walked into a room, the atmosphere changed. That smile arrived first, then he enthusiastically — and loudly — greeted everyone with a hug and a pat on the back.

He always tried to make other people's lives better and to put a positive spin on hard times. "It ain't nothing but two tears in a bucket," he would say to friends. "Why you stressing? Them two tears ain't going to fill it up."

Kenny worked for Bluebonnet for decades and his career mirrored Jeff's, though they

**Kenny Roland on his family's horse, Buster, during a Caldwell County parade in an undated family photo. His daughter, Kennedy, still rides Buster in a pasture behind the home her father built in Lockhart. Below, Kenny, flashing his signature smile, with Kennedy at the 2012 Lineman's Rodeo competition. Below, right, a third family photo of Kenny and Cathy Roland with their newborn daughter, Kennedy, in 2005.**



Gary Barabas worked in oil fields for years, but he found a home and work family when he joined Bluebonnet. Today he handles service requests — like installing this energy-efficient LED security light in February — for members in the San Marcos, Lockhart and Luling areas. (Sarah Beal photo)

were at opposite geographic sides of the co-op's service territory. He rose from apprentice to lineman to crew supervisor, a natural leader and patient mentor at the co-op's Red Rock Service Center near Lockhart.

Like Jeff, Kenny was a key member of the lineman's rodeo team, competing every year since 2007. Cathy and Kennedy joined the audience of well-wishers as Kenny climbed poles and encouraged his fellow linemen. Kenny and Jeff and Gary Barabas had competed together on the senior team since 2011, when the team placed second and qualified for the International Lineman's Rodeo in Kansas.

But the 2014 Texas Lineman's Rodeo was

special. Kenny knew what Jeff had overcome to be on the roster and Kenny was determined to do his best to honor his teammates, who by then included alternate James Jordan.

### High hopes for winning

Gary grew up in Luling, working in oil fields on drilling rigs for 20 years before coming to Bluebonnet at age 39.

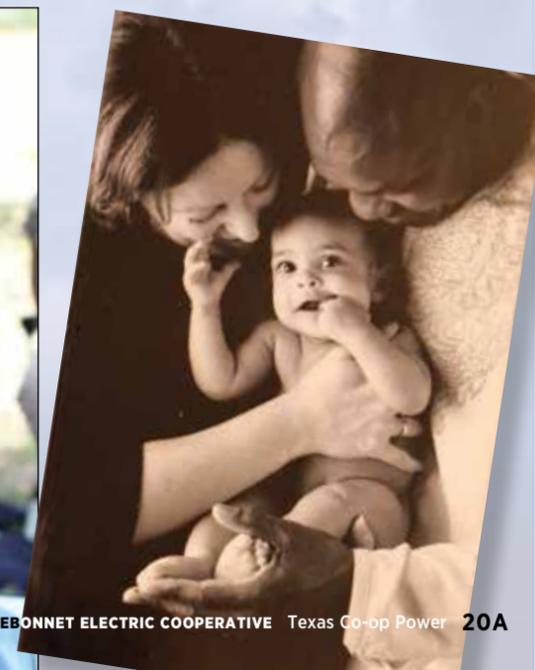
The father of a boy and girl — Blain and Bliss — Gary is an outdoors enthusiast who hunts, fishes, floats the San Marcos River and barbecues with friends and family on his days off. He began his Bluebonnet career in 2000 as a line worker and moved up through the ranks as an apprentice, then a journeyman lineman.

Gary joined Jeff and Kenny on the senior rodeo team in 2011, the year they won second place. The three joined ranks again in 2012 and 2013.

"It was fun," Gary said. "We three were a good team and worked great together."

In 2014, with Jeff competing again and Gary's longtime life partner Jaime Garner cheering him on, Gary had high hopes of returning to the winners' stage.

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From left: During the 2014 Texas Lineman's Rodeo, Gary and Kenny race against the clock in competition to be named the best senior team in Texas. They haul equipment and tools between events, and Jeff inspects a piece of equipment. The Bluebonnet team trained especially hard in 2014, hoping to bring home the elusive first-place trophy. Below, the crowd erupts into high-fives and

cheers when the announcer says Bluebonnet's team won the title. Kenny (in red shirt), Gary (in blue shirt) and team captain Randall Bownds (in gray shirt and cap) savor the moment. Their win qualified them to compete in the International Lineman's Rodeo in Kansas three months later against the best in the nation. It was the last time the four friends would be together. (Jay Godwin photos)



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## 'It's an adrenaline rush'

James was the fourth member of the crew of Bluebonnet senior linemen. He grew up in Houston, then moved to Giddings — his wife Pshaun's hometown — when the young couple were expecting Dominique, the first of their two sons. They wanted to raise him and, later, brother DeVonte, in the country.

Soon after arriving in Giddings in 1991, James got a job as a meter reader at Bluebonnet.

James was an eager participant in his first lineman's rodeo in 2005, winning first place in an apprentice division event. He won second and third place on a journeyman lineman team in 2009. "I just fell in love with it," he said of the rodeo competition. "It's an adrenaline rush."

In 2013, when he turned 45, James joined the senior rodeo team as the alternate member. Training and competing with career linemen Jeff, Kenny and Gary was a thrill.

After the sudden cardiac arrest sidelined Jeff in December 2013, James was prepared to take Jeff's place on the team if he needed to. But Jeff was relentless in his rehab and his doctor cleared him to compete.

"Everyone was excited about Jeff's return," James said. "We were all hoping for a big win."

Most people didn't know that James had been in pain for months by the time the rodeo rolled around. His left leg tingled and he couldn't stand for long. He knew what it was; he'd had surgery for a herniated disc before. But James told his doctor to postpone a second surgery until after the competition.

He was a member of the senior team, and he wasn't going to let his teammates down.

## A day at Nolte Island Park

The sky was pitch black when Bluebonnet employees arrived at Nolte Island Park on the morning of July 19, 2014. Flashlights provided just enough light to collect and inspect equipment needed to compete in the 18th annual Texas Lineman's Rodeo. It was Bluebonnet's 10th consecutive trip to the competition.

The event, held every July, was created by the Texas Lineman's Rodeo Association. It's a chance for families and friends to watch linemen from utilities across the state display their skills. The weather is usually sweltering as line workers race against the judges' stopwatches to prove they are the best of the best.

Well over 100 competitors showcase their skills in three divisions: apprentice, those studying to become line workers; journeyman, those who have completed classroom and apprenticeship programs; and seniors, who are journeymen 45 or older. It's not glamorous. Across a field of 40-foot poles, sweaty men weighted with leather equipment belts pull wagons heavy with tools

from one event to another.

Jeff, Kenny and Gary competed in five categories that showcased how they would rescue an injured lineman, how fast they could ascend and descend a pole and how well they changed and repaired equipment. They felt good about their performance, but they had a tough close competitor — Farmers Electric Cooperative from Northeast Texas.

"Every year we'd be on edge because it's hot out there and we didn't know how things were going," James remembered.

As always, Kenny kept everyone's spirits high during competition, chiming in with his motto: "Stick with me, I'll make you famous."

It's a phrase he and Cathy shared — she to inspire students at her dance studio ("If you listen to me, I will make you famous"), he as a constant mantra with colleagues during and after work.

"We'd say 'Are you serious?'" James said. "Then we would sit back and laugh. He always made everyone at ease."

Family, friends and colleagues gathered that evening at picnic tables under a pavil-

ion as the winners were announced. When the Farmers Electric team was called to the stage for a second-place win, Bluebonnet fans knew their team would take home the flashy first-place trophy.

"Finally," James told himself, "we did it!"

"We were so tickled," remembers Randall Bownds, a lineman and coach of Bluebonnet rodeo teams. "Everybody wants to win, but everybody really wanted that senior team to win."

Randall searched for the proper words to congratulate the team that night.

"We had so many obstacles this year. But there was one man who overcame a big obstacle and he's here today. He trained and practiced with us in the hot sun. He didn't miss a step. The dedication Jeff showed, he was gonna rodeo no matter what.

"He was a real inspiration. The whole senior team has been an inspiration. Watching them compete — not due to age but their dedication, their fun, their loyalty to each other and the rodeo."

Jeff was 55, Gary was 53, Kenny was 51 and James was 46 when they celebrated with

their friends that night.

That was the last Texas Lineman's Rodeo for the champion senior team.

## Six months later

Kenny was busy in January 2015 putting the final touches on Lockhart's Martin Luther King Jr. March — arranging food donations and lining up speakers. The march was a huge success and one of many community events Kenny had started, or been involved with. Bluebonnet was even one of the sponsors.

The Monday march was followed by a Bluebonnet workday on Tuesday, and then Kenny, a Lockhart city councilman, attended a public meeting that night. He was tired but said he felt good. It was Jan. 20, 2015.

## A chair saved for Kenny

Joyce Buckner was 15 miles from her home in Lockhart, driving to Bluebonnet's Service Center in Red Rock early that Wednesday morning, Jan. 21. She saw an ambulance in a neighborhood along the way, but didn't pay much attention. It was 6:20; she had a 7 a.m. meeting, and she was never late.

Joyce, one of Bluebonnet's community representatives, picked her usual chair at the back of the meeting room, set her purse on the floor and saved a chair for her longtime, dear friend Kenny Roland.

The weekly meeting is mandatory for linemen and others to learn about safety issues and topics of interest. Joyce waited for a text from Kenny so she could open the back door, a small workplace tradition for the two.

The phone in Joyce's purse vibrated. She stepped away to answer. Suddenly, the others in the room heard her scream "No!"

The ambulance she had seen that morning was at Kenny's house, and she had just learned

that she would never see him again. A friend of Cathy Roland told Joyce that Kenny had died peacefully in his sleep. He was just 52.

The devastating news spread quickly. Linemen and employees working in Bluebonnet's Brenham and Giddings offices were in similar safety meetings when the calls and texts started.

Overwhelming grief turned the morning's mood dark and tears flowed. It was like a missing man formation. Everyone was in his or her place except Kenny. His chair was empty.

Randall Bownds, the lineman rodeo coach, was leading another safety meeting 50 miles away in Giddings. "It got real silent and I had to get up and walk out and leave the room. I couldn't hold it back," he said.

"Linemen form a bond. You laugh with them, cry with them and work with them. It's devastating when you lose one.

"I have to say losing Kenny was the hardest," Randall said.

## Celebration turns somber

The day after Kenny's death was supposed to be a celebration for Bluebonnet. Once a year, the cooperative has a company-wide meeting to honor employees for their achievements and community service during the previous year as well as their years of service, including those who retired in the past 12 months. It's the one day when almost all employees are gathered together.

But Jan. 22, 2015, was somber. Tears fell on round tables that filled the big room at

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the Bastrop Convention & Exhibit Center. Numb disbelief hung in the air.

Just a year earlier, Kenny had walked across the stage at Recognition Day to receive the co-op's Foundation Value Award for Love. That, along with safety, courage, respect, reliability and community, are the six guiding principles for Bluebonnet employees. It was a fitting tribute to a man who loved, and was loved, by so many.

He was scheduled to walk the stage again, to present the coveted award to another employee. The co-op's rodeo team members — linemen, apprentices, judges and others who helped produce the rodeo event — sat together at a table watching as another employee took over Kenny's duties. Almost all were wearing the 2014 Lineman's Rodeo logo shirts in Kenny's honor, and when the meeting ended, the rodeo team collected donations to buy a memorial for their fallen friend.

## Farewell to a friend

Over the next two days, thousands attended Kenny's visitation and funeral in Lockhart. The funeral was at the First Baptist Church because it has the largest sanctuary in town, but it couldn't hold all the tearful mourners who crowded into adjacent rooms and spilled onto sidewalks.

A seemingly endless line of family members, elected officials, Bluebonnet colleagues, church friends and community activists hugged and comforted Cathy and Kennedy Roland, who was 9. They didn't know who all of these people were, but they saw that Kenny had touched more lives than they ever imagined.

He had been the first African-American elected to the Lockhart City Council and he was the key organizer of that city's first MLK Jr. March in 2004. Two months after Kenny's death, the Texas House of Representatives passed a memorial resolution that recognized his contributions to community, church and the thousands of lives he touched.

## Words to set in stone

Six months later, line worker teams from all over Texas stood with hard hats in hands at the opening ceremonies of the 2015 Texas Lineman's Rodeo outside Seguin. For a silent moment they honored Kenny. Jeff, standing in the bucket of a work truck, raised the American flag during the emotional tribute.

Cathy told Bluebonnet's team: "Win or lose, you are all champions in his heart and mind. So just do it Kenny Roland style — living it and loving it. I know he will be watching over all of you with that great big smile."

A year after Kenny's death, the senior rodeo



**The Hohlt's — Hannah, left, Jeff, Kayla, Pam and Dylan at their home in Brenham in February. They have always been close, but after Jeff's brush with death from sudden cardiac arrest on Christmas Day 2013, they savor time together. Hannah performed CPR on her dad and kept him alive until emergency crews arrived. (Sarah Beal photo)**

team and coaches piled into a Chevrolet Suburban and drove to Lockhart. They unloaded a dark gray granite footstone and carried it to Kenny's grave under shade trees in the Lockhart Municipal Burial Park. Cathy and Kennedy Roland and Joyce Buckner joined them. The marker is engraved with a Bluebonnet logo and the words "In Honor of Our 'Brother' Kenny Roland, 2014 Bluebonnet Electric Rodeo Team."

The first year after Kenny died, Cathy said she and Kennedy were on autopilot, and just "got by." The second year they "got through." Last year, the enormity of his death sunk in.

"We've cried more," Cathy said. "It's been harder on us both." Kennedy misses her dad.

He was teaching her how to ride her horse, play golf, throw a football, rollerblade and hop on a pogo stick. The two often wrestled in the living room and Kennedy loved sneaking upstairs on Saturday mornings and waking her dad by jumping on the bed.

Rituals have turned to memories. "He was

so much fun," Kennedy said.

Cathy still owns The Dancing Center Unlimited, the business Kenny encouraged her to start in 1999. Kennedy is 12, in sixth grade at Lockhart Montessori School.

Cathy continues to design a headstone for Kenny's grave. "It took me a year to be able to walk into the monument business in Lockhart," she said. "That stone is final. I'm not ready."

The headstone will be shaped like Texas in black marble with flecks of blue. Flower urns will adorn each side.

"It will have the Bluebonnet (logo) and foundation values because Kenny represented those well," Cathy said. "If you took those values, it would describe Kenny to a T."

More importantly, there's a lot of space on the back for an epitaph and Cathy is still thinking about what it should say.

"It has to depict Kenny — his life and what he represents," she said. "If someone walks by, I want them to say, 'Wow, that's a great guy.'"



**Cathy and Kennedy Roland visit Kenny's grave at Lockhart Municipal Burial Park in February. The third year after his death hit them hardest with grief, but they continue to feel his presence, they said. Cathy is still working on his headstone, trying to write a fitting epitaph that will let visitors know the amazing man her husband was and how much she, Kennedy and the world have lost. (Sarah Beal photo)**

Gary made some lifestyle changes, too.

"Since then I've quit smoking and (am) doing better with exercise," he said. "Still haven't gotten the eating down right yet," he added, laughing.

James has fully recovered from herniated disc surgery in 2015. Today, he supervises Bluebonnet's metering department.

"This has brought us all closer together," James said, "because we know at any given time, any one of us could pass. So we know we should cherish the time we have together. Let's make the best of it and talk. Let's not lose touch."

Jeff's daughter Hannah married last year, and Kayla is getting married this month. He and Pam keep in touch with Cathy and Kennedy Roland, sending cards for holidays and special events.

Gary and James were each expecting their first grandchild in March.

Jeff joined one of Bluebonnet's journeyman teams for the 2017 Lineman's Rodeo. James and Gary haven't competed since 2014.

There hasn't been another senior Bluebonnet rodeo team since Kenny's death. Bluebonnet will compete at the 2018 Texas Lineman's Rodeo on July 21, but there won't be a senior team this year, either.

The Texas Lineman's Rodeo, the three friends agree, isn't the same without Kenny Roland's boisterous personality and magnetic smile.

"We lost a friend," James said.

"We lost a family member," Jeff adds.

"Anyone who met Kenny knows what we lost," Gary said. ■

## The rodeo team today

Bluebonnet's three senior rodeo team members — Jeff, Gary and James — gathered recently for lunch. It was the first time the three had been together since Kenny's death. They thought back to the rodeo championship several years ago. Just seven months before that victorious day, one of the team members had almost died, and six months later one would. Their tight-knit fellowship, part of the bond between Bluebonnet linemen, helps keep them going in the wake of tragedy.

Their memories are filled with laughter tempered by sadness. Losing Kenny was devastating personally, but was a huge loss professionally, too.

"He was a good teacher and a good influence (with new employees)," said Gary, a journeyman at the Red Rock Service Center who today works service orders in the San Marcos, Lockhart and Luling areas. "He was a peacemaker and if there was a problem, he knew how to de-escalate it.

"Kenny was knowledgeable about everything

and knew how to talk to people the way they wanted to be talked to," he said. "He was great with (Bluebonnet) members and had a work ethic he passed along to younger employees."

Then, thinking about that work ethic, all three burst into laughter. They recalled how at the end of a shift, Kenny's clothes were often cleaner than theirs.

"Learn how to work smarter, not harder," Kenny would advise them.

There was a lot of soul-searching after the 13 months between Jeff's sudden cardiac arrest and Kenny's unexpected death. (The official cause of his death was "undetermined," but the coroner's report noted blockage of the arteries.)

"It changes your priorities," Jeff said. "I used to think about having money — now I think 'It's only money.' I'm thinking more about how good it is to wake up each morning."

Jeff is still a crew supervisor and walks 3 to 4 miles a day (6 or more on the weekend.) He's following a fairly strict diet and wears a Fitbit exercise band to make sure he takes 12,000 steps a day.



**James Jordan, left, Jeff Hohlt and Gary Barabas meet for lunch in February to share how their priorities changed after Jeff's sudden cardiac arrest and Kenny Roland's death. Healthier diets and more exercise are their goals, but cherishing time with family and friends is most important. 'Let's not lose touch,' James said. (Sarah Beal photo)**