

The HOTZONE Story

by Danny Snell

I have often alluded to the HOTZONE Conference as being the best kept secret in the HazMat Response industry.

It all began with a visit from Craig Carroll who was a Federal On-Scene Coordinator with EPA. He showed up in my office one day asking if I knew of any HazMat Responder Conferences in the Federal Region VI area. At that time, the answer was NO. He asked if the Houston Fire Department Hazardous Materials Response Team would be interested in partnering with EPA Region VI to establish one. With the blessing and support of my Fire Chief, our answer was YES. My Asst Coordinator, Bob Royall and I put together a proposal along with several other departments from Region VI and gave our best spiel on why it should be done in Houston. The panel thought the Dallas-Ft. Worth Metroplex was more centrally located in Region VI, but all agreed that Houston's proximity to the chemical industry was vital. They decided to hold the first conference in Ft. Worth and then go to Houston for the second one.

Now keep in mind that outside of occasionally speaking or attending other conferences, neither Bob or I had any experience with hosting or managing a conference. He and I attended several conferences and took extensive notes on how and what was being done behind the scenes. We formed a Steering Committee made up of key figures, movers and shakers, in the HazMat community from all over Region VI and away we went.

If anything was destined for failure, it was HOTZONE.... Our first HOTZONE Conference was to be held in Ft. Worth in May of 2000. On March 28th of 2000, an F3 tornado tore through downtown Ft. Worth, destroying the hotel we had planned to use. We quickly changed our dates to October after the hotel assured us, they would be ready at that time. A month before the October date we visited the hotel and found out they were in full renovation and would not be available in October. It was too late to cancel, so we scrambled to find a different hotel in Ft. Worth who would be able to host a modest HazMat Responder Conference. We found one and while they were doing some repairs, they too, assured us they would be complete upon our arrival.

The big day arrived. Bob Royall and I along with six of my HMRT members loaded up four vehicles with equipment and supplies and off to Ft. Worth we went to host the very first HOTZONE Conference. I arrived at the hotel first and got out to stretch my legs as the rest of our convoy arrived. It was at that time I heard a faint Beep, Beep, Beep coming from

inside the hotel lobby as a Bobcat skid-steer backed through the front doors of the hotel and proceeded to dump a bucket of debris into a huge dumpster. Tommy Erickson looked at me and said, “Your kidding, right?”. Nope, it was real!

The lobby, restaurant, and most of the second floor were in the middle of a full restoration. We did not have the option to cancel or move as we had attendees and instructors literally enroute to Ft. Worth. Needless to say, we had a so called “Come to Jesus” meeting with the hotel management.

On October 11, 2000, the very first HOTZONE Conference was held with 316 folks attending. Despite all of the adversity and challenges, it was deemed a huge success due mostly to the attitudes, determination and perseverance of all who attended.

The next year, HOTZONE was held in Houston with over 450 attending. After the huge success of the 2nd conference, it was decided to anchor HOTZONE in Houston and we have been there ever since.

One of the things about HOTZONE that I am most proud of and I think sets our conference above others is the Scholarship Program. The Steering Committee, who is and has been made up of key individuals from the various HazMat response agencies, recognized from the beginning that most individuals or agencies simply do not have a lot of funds for travel expenses. To assist with that problem, from the beginning, HOTZONE offers Full and Partial Scholarships to help our responders gain access to quality and timely information about Hazardous Materials Response. Through partnerships with numerous agencies, individuals, and organizations along with direct funding from HOTZONE, Inc., we are able to pay for registration and rooming for most of our attendees. A Full Scholarship provides for registration and four nights at the hotel while a Partial Scholarship covers registration only.

Since our inception in 2000, HOTZONE and its partners have funded 4,784 responders to attend the HOTZONE Conference. An average of just over 200 of those attending each year will receive some form of assistance. There is no other conference of this size doing that. We cannot adequately express how thankful we are to all our partners for graciously helping to fund the attendance of our HazMat Responders from all over the country. You may never know how many lives you have saved or changed because of your generosity and devotion to the education of our Responders, but please know it has not gone unnoticed.

You cannot have a successful conference without vision and some key components. The HOTZONE Steering Committee has been the vision and driving force behind our success. None of the members are professional conference planners. We are all professional HazMat Responders from different walks of life with a passion for making certain that our

next generation of Responders are adequately trained and equipped with the knowledge to serve the citizens they have sworn to protect.

That education cannot happen without instructors. We offer some of the best instructors in the United States. Many of them are authors of the very books used in fire and hazmat training academies. Attendees will often have the opportunity to sit down and have one-on-one discussions with some of the most influential people in the HazMat world.

Support from our exhibitors is also crucial to our mission. Without their support, we simply would not exist. Their funding allows HOTZONE to offer those Scholarships and support our speakers by funding their hotel expenses. They know that none of us are carrying the department checkbook, but they also know that we know who does. As you visit their booths, look for new and innovative things that you may be able to use in your department. Then take that information back to your management team. Support our exhibitors so they can support you.

Of course, if no one attended, there would be no reason to hold such a conference. Over the 25 plus years of HOTZONE, we have averaged a little over 650 in total attendance for just under 15,000 in total attendance. All of this is a result of word-of-mouth advertising. If you think HOTZONE is worth your time. If you think HOTZONE has made you a better Responder. If you think others could benefit from attending HOTZONE, SPREAD THE WORD!

Well, for the most part, that's our story.

HOTZONE, Inc. is a 501 (c) (3), non-profit organization dedicated to the timely education and training of our Responders through the partnership of others. No one, absolutely no one receives any pay or financial income from HOTZONE, Inc. Our financial goal is to have enough funds to pay for the current conference and seed next year's conference.

If you are interested in partnering with HOTZONE, please reach out to us through the contact us link.