STARS®

FALL 2026

HORIZONS

CRITICAL CARE, ANYWHERE.



\\ **WOMEN OF THE SKY**
PAULA QUIROGA IS A GAME-CHANGING LEADER IN AVIATION

\\ **COMMUNITY SUPPORT**
HONOURING THE GIVING LEGACY OF **FRAN NARGANG**

\\ **TOOLS AND TECH**
THE BENEFITS OF USING **AI** IN PATIENT CARE

A UNITED FARM RESCUE

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT SAVED **JIM YOUNG**'S LIFE

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Published for STARS
STARS Editors Angela Anderson-Blunt, Kristy Archibald, Lyle Aspinall

Published by RedPoint Media Group
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On the cover: Jim Young
Photo by Damian Blunt/Mustard Productions

WELCOME



Falling leaves are a reminder to reflect on the past few months at STARS. Summer was busy across the organization, and as people spent more time outside and mission numbers increased, our frontline staff remained ready to respond when needed. At the same time, STARS Foundation teams were out making connections with the people whose support and generosity make it possible for us to serve communities across Western Canada.

In this issue of *Horizons*, we are proud to highlight the power of collaboration with our community and with our partners in health care, who help us continually build advanced emergency critical care and transport.

You will get a behind-the-scenes look at a mission only made possible by remarkable interagency collaboration. Learn about Jim Young's STARS mission, which included a rare stop for blood en route to the University of Alberta Hospital (page 4). And discover how several agencies worked together to create a new process that gets critical patients to operating rooms sooner (page 3).

Saving patients in need and working to create advancements in critical care technology would not be possible without the support of our community.

An example of this support comes from the Old Grouch fundraiser, which raised thousands of dollars for STARS (page 9). That story began when STARS flew Fran Nargang's grandson years ago, setting off a cascade of events that is truly something to write in the stars.

Lastly, I was honoured to participate in the Inspiring Speakers Series during the Innovation Showcase for MindFuel's Tech Futures Challenge. MindFuel creates an environment for creation and solution innovation to thrive amongst the younger generation's brightest minds. Learn about STARS' emerging use of medical AI in a joint effort with two schools at the University of Calgary (page 8).

STARS exists today because of the organizations, people, and schools that stand behind us. Every person plays an essential role in helping us continue our life-saving mission, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *Horizons*.

Dr. John Froh
President & CEO, STARS

PHOTOGRAPHS \\ LYLE ASPINALL



The Direct-to-OR process involves multiple organizations working together to save lives — when every second counts.

PHOTOGRAPH \\ LYLE ASPINALL

A Joint Effort in Calgary

With several agencies working together, critical patients can reach the operating room sooner.

By Kate Langille

STARS patients landing at Calgary's trauma hospital, the Foothills Medical Centre, now have a quicker path to the operating room (OR) thanks to interagency collaboration — including the efforts of two STARS transport physicians.

It is common practice in Canada for all patients, even those in most urgent need of an OR, to first go through the emergency department (ED) for registration. This adds time that some patients just don't have.

"There were times we had patients who clearly needed urgent surgery," said Dr. Cam Shillington, Foothills anesthesiologist and STARS transport physician. "Going down to ED to properly register them in the system, even with everyone trying to help, added time. Bringing them straight to the OR can save up to 30 minutes."

Dr. Shillington helped create a proposal from an anesthesia and OR perspective. His STARS colleague Dr. Jennifer Nicol, who is also a Foothills emergency medicine physician, worked with Alberta Health Services trauma coordinator Kelly Osinski to formalize a Direct-to-OR pathway. This allows critical care patients to bypass the ED and head straight to the OR. A similar process was achieved in Edmonton a few years earlier, also with the help of STARS transport physicians.

Coordinating logistics was just as important as coordinating the clinical work.

RAAPID is the call centre that connects rural physicians with the STARS Emergency Link Centre, STARS transport physicians, and hospital staff. Connect Care is the Alberta medical record tracking system. RAAPID, Clinical Informatics, and Patient Registration built a workflow that has never existed before. The new system ensures a patient arriving on the helipad already has a chart registered. As such, patients can go directly to the OR and bypass the ED completely.

Last summer, the Calgary Direct-to-OR pathway underwent a full eSIM simulation, using a human patient simulator to run the entire scenario, from the initial call to bypassing the ED and arriving at the OR. The exercise brought together all key partners for a complete practice run.

The first STARS mission to use the Direct-to-OR process happened on a day Dr. Nicol wasn't on shift, but she jumped in to help.

"A patient with a surgical emergency triggered a soft launch. I wasn't on call, but I supported the transport physician and met the team at the helipad. Having the surgical team and anesthesia waiting in the OR made all the difference," said Dr. Nicol.

The Direct-to-OR process reflects the raw commitment of countless people and multiple organizations working together to save the lives of patients in critical condition, when seconds count.



PHOTOGRAPH \\ DAMIAN BLUNT/MUSTARD PRODUCTIONS

Teams Unite to Give Farmer a Second Chance at Life

When a serious accident put Jim Young in critical condition, impressive teamwork and quick thinking resulted in a life-saving outcome.

By Lyle Aspinall

Jim Young had done this countless times before. The darned tractor wouldn't fire up, so he'd just jump it with a screwdriver.

This time, though, the 72-year-old farmer didn't realize it was in gear.

Jim stood with his son Kent in front of the left rear tire, bridged the starter's contacts – and the tractor lurched to life, heaving forward.

Both men were knocked down. As Kent scrambled up, his dad was already under the 5,000-kg machine. A cultivator was connected, its many shovels advancing toward Jim as he struggled on the ground.

"I had to wait for the tractor to climb over top of him," said Kent. "And then I pulled him out of the way."

Kent dialled 911 and STARS was alerted.

"We know if a farmer is calling for an ambulance, it's probably a serious situation," said STARS flight paramedic Jeremy Mandoli, on shift in Grande Prairie, 100 kilometres away from the Young acreage north of Valleyview, Alta.

Community, emergency crews, and family rallied. Police marshalled, fire crews prepped a helicopter landing zone, and ground medics readied Jim for STARS. Dangerously low blood pressure and a swelling abdomen pointed to major internal bleeding.

"Jim was pale. White as a ghost. His skin was very sweaty, and in the context of trauma and bleeding, those signs are very concerning," said STARS flight nurse David Vultaggio.

The STARS air medical crew (AMC) began infusing blood. As Jim was loaded into the helicopter, they





Community, emergency crews, and family members rallied together to prepare for STARS' arrival and also helped Jim Young after his accident.

started a second unit. His blood pressure didn't improve.

Jim urgently needed the operating room (OR) at Edmonton's University of Alberta Hospital, but there wasn't enough blood for the hour-long flight.

Allies, including the STARS Emergency Link Centre and the Northern Communications Centre, found a solution. Jim would bypass standard hospital intake and go straight to the OR. Whitecourt Healthcare Centre, halfway to Edmonton, would avail two units of blood for STARS en route.

When STARS captain Paula Quiroga landed the helicopter in Whitecourt, co-pilot Eldon Schoenroth hopped out, received a cooler of blood over a fence from a waiting ambulance attendant, and promptly returned.

Total time on the ground: less than three minutes.

When the helicopter finally arrived in Edmonton, the OR team was waiting on the helipad with another unit of blood. Jim remained conscious the entire time.

"As we're transferring him to the surgical table," said Vultaggio, "he's asking us how he can continue to support STARS and donate or get a calendar."



STARS flight paramedic Jeremy Mandoli (left) and flight nurse David Vultaggio were part of the mission that saved Jim Young's life.

Mandoli mused, "It's one of those things that will always stay with me from that mission. We couldn't do this without our donors."

Thanks to allied coordination and expertise, Jim survived. He spent several months in hospital and endured a difficult recovery at home, but eventually was back on his feet.

"If it wasn't for you STARS donors out there, I wouldn't be alive to this day," Jim said. "I've got to thank you all. Immensely."

Scan the code or visit stars.ca/jimyoung to watch the video.

VERY IMPORTANT PATIENT

PHOTOGRAPHS \\ TOP LEFT AND TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF THE YOUNG FAMILY. BOTTOM: DAMIAN BLUNT/MUSTARD PRODUCTIONS.

Meet Paula Quiroga

Role: Pilot

Where: Edmonton and Grande Prairie bases

STARS history: 10 years with STARS



ELEVATING EXPOSURE

As one of three full-time female pilots at STARS, Paula Quiroga is a game-changing and inspiring leader in the aviation field.

By Karin Olafson

At age 16, Paula Quiroga knew she wanted a career in the air. While in a canoe, working for Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources, she looked up to see a float plane soar overhead. It was the first time she'd ever seen one.

"As soon as I saw that plane, I thought: 'I can see myself doing that,'" said Quiroga. But she wasn't sure how to get started in the field; no one in Quiroga's family was involved in aviation, and she didn't know anyone personally who could offer her advice. She certainly didn't know any women who worked as pilots.

Even today, global data shows that aviation and air rescue are fields still comprised mostly of men — across the world, women make up less than seven per cent of all licensed pilots.

"Aviation is an extremely male-dominated field. Girls aren't necessarily exposed to the idea of working in aviation — I certainly wasn't," said Quiroga. "Typically, if someone says 'pilot,' they picture a man. I think girls don't even see the aviation field as a possibility for them."

But as a teen, that lack of representation didn't bother Quiroga. At only 17, she started flight school.

"When school was finished, I hit the road. I went all over Alberta and B.C., and visited every helicopter company I could, dropping off resumés, meeting people in person, all that," said Quiroga.

PHOTOGRAPH \\ LYLE ASPINALL

Women of the Sky: A Series

In a field that is still male dominated, the trailblazing women working at STARS are fuelling change. They're breaking barriers, filling critical roles, and inspiring young women to pursue meaningful careers. This article is the second in the series.

She got her first flying job in 2006, then gained years of experience flying helicopters for pipeline construction, wildlife surveys, and fire suppression. When she joined STARS in 2016, she started working at the Grande Prairie base, eventually becoming the aviation base manager, leading 10 pilots. She split flight duties between Grande Prairie and Edmonton and recently transitioned to the Edmonton base full time as its aviation base manager. Today, she's one of three full-time female pilots at STARS.

"I love the teamwork aspect of the job," said Quiroga. "It's me and another pilot, and at least two health professionals on a call together. When we [as pilots] watch the medical crew doing their thing, even when they're doing simulations, it's phenomenal to see their work, and we're in awe. But it goes the other way around, too — the nurses, paramedics, and doctors hear us make the calls and are amazed we're flying these helicopters. There's a mutual respect."

Quiroga said flying STARS helicopters is the most meaningful job she's held. Not only does she make life-saving missions possible, but she's showing other women that it's realistic to have a successful career as a pilot while also being a mom.

"When I began at STARS, I was about to get married and I knew I wanted to be a mom — and I knew I still wanted to be a helicopter pilot, too," said Quiroga, who now has two children, ages seven and two. "I knew quite a few other female pilots who gave up on flying when they became moms, and I didn't want that. STARS offered the balance of working [in the air] and also being there for my kids."

She said representation is integral to inspiring more young women to pursue a career in the clouds.

"I try to get out to events where I can provide that exposure to younger females who are interested in flying and talk to them about this field. I'm always open for a chat and to bring people to the hangar and talk to them about aviation."

Grande Prairie Base Celebrates 20 Years

The STARS base where Paula Quiroga spent the first decade of her career is now celebrating 20 years. Here are some key moments at STARS Grande Prairie from over the years.

- **Recognizing remote-access critical care needs in northern Alberta, discussions for a STARS base begin with many stakeholders in 2003. Oil and gas partners provide initial funding.**
- **The Grande Prairie base's grand opening comes on Dec. 1, 2006; the first mission dispatch occurs during the event.**
- **Grande Prairie Airport becomes the first in STARS history to waive landing fees to help support STARS' life-saving mission.**
- **One year later, the city's new hospital helipad opens, aided greatly by the Peace River Regional District in B.C. As the ceremony unfolds in frigid weather, STARS lands with a real patient.**
- **In 2008, Saddle Hills County becomes the first municipality to make a major commitment of support and challenges others to follow. Today, almost every Alberta municipality recognizes STARS as an extension of emergency protective services for residents.**
- **Community fundraisers flourish, including the Birchcliff Energy and Friends STARS Charity Golf Tournament, accumulating more than $2 million since 2007, and the Grande Prairie Petroleum Association's Hangar Dance, raising more than $1 million over 11 years.**
- **A 20th anniversary gala is held in October 2026 to celebrate the valued partnerships that enable STARS' steadfast commitment to serving northern residents.**



A patient arrives on Grande Prairie Regional Hospital's new helipad on Dec. 7, 2007 — the same day of the helipad's official opening ceremony.

PHOTOGRAPH \\ FROM STARS ARCHIVES



STARS President and CEO Dr. John Froh speaks about STARS innovation during the 2026 Tech Futures Challenge at the University of Calgary.

Advancing Patient Care Through Innovation

New projects using technology to better detect patients' conditions and improve charting will soon elevate care even further.

By Jayden Brasok

Innovation is helping advance our commitment to providing the highest level of care to patients across Western Canada. At STARS, this includes two projects currently in development: the Continuous Early Warning Score (CEWS) and the use of AI to support charting efficiency.

"Every innovation we explore at STARS comes back to the patient," said STARS President and CEO Dr. John Froh. "The support we receive from our community enables us to look at how emerging tools such as AI can help support our crews, strengthen care, and give patients the best possible chance."

CONTINUOUS EARLY WARNING SCORE

Some changes in a patient's condition cannot be detected by the human eye in real time. CEWS, currently being developed by STARS in partnership with the University of Calgary's Cumming School of Medicine and Schulich School of Engineering, uses an AI model to identify these subtle patterns and alert the crew sooner that a patient's condition may be deteriorating.

During a mission, crews already monitor information such as a patient's heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen levels. The CEWS model would analyze patient readings together and compare how they are changing with patterns typically seen in other critically ill patients. Every 10 seconds, it would produce a score from zero to 10.

Displayed on a monitor in the helicopter, a rising CEWS would indicate to the crew that the patient's condition may be declining, even if no single reading appears concerning. It would also suggest possible actions based on similar patient cases, giving the crew more time to adjust care or alert the receiving hospital.

CEWS is currently in the research stage. While similar methods have been used in hospital settings, STARS is breaking ground by applying this type of emergency warning system in a pre-hospital and transport medicine setting.

USING AI FOR CHARTING EFFICIENCY

After caring for a patient, STARS crews write a detailed record of what happened on the mission and the care that was provided. Documenting these complex details takes time and careful attention, and can be challenging if the crew is called out again soon after returning.

Using AI, STARS has developed a working prototype that could listen during a mission, transcribe details as they happen, and create a draft patient care record for the crew to review, edit, and approve.

This tool would allow crews to direct even more of their attention to the patient and reduce the time they spend completing records afterward, helping them be ready sooner to aid the next patient in need.

This past summer, the AI charting prototype was tested in STARS clinical education simulations in Saskatoon and Edmonton, where it performed strongly. Further testing and refinement are planned before it could be introduced as an option for STARS crews to use on missions.

While AI charting tools are already used in other areas of health care, STARS' prototype is unique in that it is designed specifically for in-flight use to document the critical care procedures our crews perform.

Both areas of innovation were highlighted this spring when Dr. Froh presented Using Machine Learning and AI to Enhance Clinical Practice as part of the Inspiring Speakers Series at MindFuel's Tech Futures Challenge 2026 Innovation Showcase.

With continued support from donors like you, STARS can continue to collaborate to advance innovations that help our crews provide the highest level of care to patients in our communities.

Protecting Patient Privacy

The AI charting tool has been designed from the start to protect privacy. Crew speech is temporarily transcribed on a local device, and the AI extracts information relevant to the patient chart. The completed chart is the only information that would be stored permanently, in the same secure system STARS uses to store patient records today.

PHOTOGRAPH \\ LYLE ASPINALL



(Left to right) STARS employees Vanessa Mickel and Sarah Eccleston with Jay Nargang and Fran Nargang at a 2024 cheque presentation at Old Grouch café.

PHOTOGRAPH \\ OLD GROUCH CUSTOMER

Celebrating a Legacy of Support

After Fran Nargang's grandson was rescued by a STARS air ambulance nearly two decades ago, she began raising money for STARS through an annual music fundraiser. Following Fran's recent passing, that fundraising continues in her honour.

By Alicia L'Archevêque

In 2006, Fran Nargang's then-11-year old grandson, Max, was playing with a friend when he was struck by a car. Max was thrown several feet, resulting in severe head trauma and a crack in his pelvis and elbow. He was flown by STARS to the Alberta Children's Hospital, where he received the timely, critical care he required to eventually make a full recovery.

This rescue motivated Fran and her husband, Garry, to pay it forward and begin raising money for STARS, something that would continue for the rest of her life.

OLD GROUCH'S ANNUAL FUNDRAISER JAM

To give back to the organization that saved her grandson, Fran and Garry organized a fundraiser in their family-owned café, Old Grouch, in Drumheller. This year marked the annual fundraiser's 17th iteration.

Born from Fran's love of live music, the Old Grouch's Jam for STARS fundraiser took the shape of a 24-hour live music event, featuring local bands from Drumheller and the surrounding areas. Along with performances, the Jam also featured fun activities like sumo wrestling and a dunk tank. Over nearly two decades, this fundraiser has raised many thousands of dollars for STARS.

"These community fundraisers are so deeply rooted in passion and gratitude, and everybody rallies together for a really great cause," said Vanessa Mickel, STARS' lead for external events in Alberta. "This whole fundraiser is really the epitome of 'by the community and for the community.'"

Beyond the 24-hour Jam, Fran and Old Grouch's support is still visible — a STARS tribute wall at the front of the café is full of plaques, pictures, and even a model helicopter.

FRAN'S LEGACY CONTINUES

In December 2025, Fran was ill, and flown and cared for by the charity she'd dedicated her life to supporting. She passed away at Calgary's Peter Lougheed Centre shortly thereafter, and her family extended their gratitude to the doctors and STARS crew who provided them a bit more time to say goodbye.

This year, the Jam fundraiser was held as an homage to Fran in June. It was broken up into two eight-hour music sessions and jams on Friday and Saturday evening, bookending a celebration of life held for Fran on Saturday morning. As per her wishes, family members and loved ones attending the celebration were encouraged to make a tribute donation to STARS in her honour. As long as the Old Grouch café remains in the Nargang family, the Jam will continue for many years to come.

"So many people came to the event to pay their respects," said Mickel. "Fran had family from [all over] who were giving us donations because they wanted it to go to a cause she was passionate about."



Philanthropist David Werklund (left) with Dr. John Froh, STARS President and CEO, during a celebration of learning for the Werklund STARS Academy last summer.

A Life-Saving Investment in STARS Education

How philanthropic support is strengthening critical care.

By Kathleen Bell

A generous $3 million gift from entrepreneur and philanthropist David Werklund recently strengthened STARS' commitment to life-saving care across Western Canada. To commemorate this support, one of STARS' renowned educational programs for medical practitioners has been renamed the Werklund STARS Academy for Critical Care Transport Medicine Education, reflecting the Werklund family's longstanding commitment to learning and its power to transform lives, teams, and communities.

"Knowledge is the greatest gift we can share," said David Werklund. "Over the years, I've seen how learning transforms individuals and communities. We're proud to support STARS and the vital work they do every day — and it's especially meaningful to see that commitment reflected in an academy that helps equip caregivers with the skills needed to save lives."

Dr. John Froh, STARS President and CEO, said, "The gift represents more than generosity; it is a shared vision for stronger, more resilient health-care systems."

Delivered in partnership with the University of Calgary's Continuing Medical Education department, the Werklund STARS Academy is a 21-week certificate program designed for rural and urban registered nurses, paramedics, and physicians. The program combines a 17-week online curriculum with a four-week, in-person experience and hands-on flight practicums at STARS bases, giving participants the opportunity to build both the technical expertise and non-technical skills required in high-risk, time-sensitive environments.

Participants complete advanced simulation, immersive in-person training, rigorous discussions, collaborative exercises, and flight practicums, while strengthening communication, teamwork, leadership, and decision-making. For STARS, the academy helps share critical care knowledge beyond a single mission, extending expertise to providers and communities across the regions it serves.

For Amanda Andreucci, a STARS flight nurse at the Grande Prairie base, the program offered more than advanced training. As a member of the 2026 graduating class, the first to carry the Werklund STARS Academy name, she said the experience changed how she approaches patient care in complex environments.

"The training, hands-on experience, and mentorship gave me the confidence and skills to deliver the highest level of care possible," said Andreucci. "It will shape my practice from here on."

Andreucci said the academy's emphasis on growth, feedback, and smaller-team dynamics strengthened her practice and reinforced how donor support helps equip crews to deliver exceptional care when patients need it most.

"Thank you to David Werklund for your generous support," she said. "Your gift truly makes a difference in people's lives by helping ensure they receive exceptional care, and we're eternally grateful."

PHOTOGRAPH \\ BART ONYSZKO

35 Years of Lasting Impact

From a concept and a community in need to a life-saving network across Western Canada, TransAlta has stood with STARS for more than 35 years. The decades of support have helped more than 66,000 patients receive critical care when they needed it most, giving thousands of families more time, more hope, and more second chances. STARS is incredibly grateful for TransAlta's dedication to saving lives. Thank you for your extraordinary partnership.

"At TransAlta, safety is one of our core values, and our partnership with STARS reflects that commitment. Since 1989, we have been proud to support this life-saving work, helping to ensure critical care remains accessible across Western Canada, particularly in rural and remote communities where many of our employees live and work."

Chris Fralick,
Executive Vice President,
Generation and Chief Operating Officer

transalta



BE PART OF THE CREW

STARS FOR LIFE

JOIN STARS FOR LIFE AS A MONTHLY DONOR AND SAVE LIVES ALL YEAR.



When an emergency happens, critical care can't wait. For Jim Young, STARS' quick response made a life-saving difference (page 4), thanks to the support of allies like you.

But Jim won't be the only patient in need of essential support. Join STARS FOR LIFE today and help STARS save more futures, all year long!

With more than 100 life-or-death calls coming in each day, your steady support is vital. Your monthly gift can make all the difference for the next patient who needs STARS.

Become a monthly donor today at stars.ca/monthly or scan the QR code.

$10/month
provides an airway-management tool.

$25/month
provides a Blood on Board cooler system.

$50/month
provides mission-critical equipment like an electronic flight bag.

PHOTOGRAPHS \\ (TOP) LYLE ASPINALL; (BOTTOM) DAMIAN BLUNT/MUSTARD PRODUCTIONS



Very Important Patient Jim Young stands with his wife, Colleen, at the site of his accident on their acreage.

Your donation makes a difference.

It allows us to be there for the next patient in need.

Please donate today.

PHOTOGRAPH \\ DAMIAN BLUNT/MUSTARD PRODUCTIONS

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