

Man saved by AED is helping Plano community add one

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By MATT WIXON / The Dallas Morning News

On the Sunday afternoon of June 23, 2002, when many people were lifting the television remote, John Gregoire was lifting weights. He was at the Plano YMCA, going through one of his three workout routines per week, trying to keep in shape.

And then his heart stopped beating. Gregoire was 44 years old, a father of three, and just minutes from death.

"I had no pains, no warnings, no shortness of breath, nothing," Gregoire said. "It was just a light-switch thing. Lights out."

Lights out is a good way to describe sudden cardiac arrest, because the heart simply stops beating. Soon after, breathing stops and so does life.

"You're basically dead," Gregoire said. "It's just a matter of if they can bring you back before it's too late."

Gregoire was brought back by an automated external defibrillator (AED), a device that sends a measured electrical shock to the heart. The YMCA had acquired an AED a few months before Gregoire's cardiac arrest, and a fellow YMCA member – who happened to be a heart surgeon – applied the shocks that brought Gregoire back.

Gregoire's heart had stopped for about two minutes before defibrillation revived him. The quick response time was crucial, because according to the American Heart Association, the chances of survival after a sudden cardiac arrest drop by 7 to 10 percent each minute until defibrillation. In 10 minutes, death is nearly certain.

Paramedics took Gregoire to Plano Medical Center, where he had surgery to insert two stents to reopen a blocked artery. Gregoire, president of the PiTV Business Unit at the Plano-based software development company BIAP Systems, made a full recovery.

Now 47, he's back to working out three times a week.

"Nothing has really changed in life," Gregoire said.

Well, he has become a little more charitable. Gregoire recently donated \$500 to the Plano Sports Authority to help pay for an AED, which costs about \$1,500.

Getting an AED for the PSA's Plano StarCenter, which is used by thousands of children and adults each week, was important to Gregoire. He spends a lot of time at the StarCenter with his wife, Paz, and their kids – Danielle, 16; Mathieu, 13; and Christopher, 11.

The PSA had considered AEDs before, executive director Mary Margaret Taylor said. But the defibrillators weren't compatible for children younger than 12.

Now that defibrillators can be used on those under 12, the PSA is purchasing an AED and training its staff to use it. Gregoire's donation helped speed up the purchase, and so did the impact of his story.

"It was a point well taken," Taylor said. "When he told his tale and I watched the video, it was like, 'Oh God, we've got to do this.' "

The video she is referring to is from Philips, a manufacturer of AEDs. Gregoire told his story as part of an informational video for Philips, and he also told his story last summer to the FDA, which was considering removing the prescription requirement for AEDs.

The FDA pulled the prescription requirement, and that has helped AEDs become more common in high-traffic areas such as malls and airports. In Collin County, most of the recreation centers have them and the school districts either have them or are considering them.

It shouldn't take much discussion. Just last month, McKinney junior W.R. Olds-Benton was revived after suffering a sudden cardiac arrest during a soccer game. Olds-Benton isn't expected to play soccer again this season, but after having surgery to repair a heart defect, the 16-year-old is recovering.

"You don't know who, when or where it's going to happen," Gregoire said of sudden cardiac arrest, which kills more than 250,000 Americans each year. "That's why these pieces of technology are so important."

And it's why Gregoire has one in his office.

"I hope someday I'm able to save somebody with it," he said.

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