

IT TAKES A SYSTEM

At 40 years old, Jennifer Quinlan wakes up every morning grateful to be alive, and acutely aware of how she might not be if events had transpired differently on the morning of January 24th.

It takes a village — or in this case, a system. The Maine Emergency Medical Services system: a coordinated, choreographed network of EMS providers, each with the training and skills to perform their specific roles, and bringing compassion and professionalism to their part of the collaborative effort.

It's a story that Jennifer, a former high school English teacher, and her husband Michael, with whom she works at their small Caribou accounting firm, now want to share with other Mainers as one way of expressing their gratitude to the EMS providers who made all the difference.

On that fateful January morning, they had no idea that one of Jen's cardiac arteries was 95 percent blocked — and that without intervention, her heart was about to shut down permanently.

Mike takes up the story, because now, looking back, his wife remembers nothing of what happened for several days before and weeks after the incident.

Before retiring the night before, Jen mentioned experiencing a heavy feeling in her chest — and Mike's Google search came up with "heart attack" and "panic attack." Concerned, he suggested they make a trip to the emergency room — but Jennifer was not enthused at the prospect, and recalled how she had resolved the same discomfort a few weeks earlier by shifting her position

and turning on her left side.

Eventually they both fell asleep. But Mike awoke around 2:30 a.m., alarmed by the sound of something like deep snoring coming from Jen. He recalls he had to shake her vigorously, and repeatedly, before she finally woke up. She got out of bed to use the bathroom, came back, and promptly went back to sleep. He walked around to her side of the bed.

"We need to go the emergency room," he urged. "I almost couldn't wake you!" Soon thereafter, she again became unresponsive.

Shaken, Mike grabbed the phone and dialed 9-1-1.

"The dispatcher asked me a few questions, and then he told me, step by step over the phone, how to clear her airway and perform chest compressions. I could tell he was also letting someone else know we needed to get an ambulance here to the house."

Some 175 miles away, in Bangor, Emergency Medical Dispatcher David King was nearing the end of his overnight shift when Mike Quinlan's 9-1-1 call came in to

the Penobscot Regional Communications Center. (For cost-effectiveness, Aroostook County contracts with the PRCC to answer incoming 9-1-1 calls,

process the information and relay it to the appropriate Aroostook agency to respond.)

"Following our ProQA Emergency Medical Dispatch protocols by asking the husband a few questions, we were able to quickly establish the location of the emergency and confirm a callback number, and determine that his wife had collapsed, had lost consciousness and was not

breathing," King explained. "The next step was to get resuscitation going ASAP by talking Mike through CPR to try to keep Jennifer's oxygen supply flowing while waiting for EMS response."

"In our position, since we are not there in person, we have to rely on what the individual at the scene is telling us for information," said King. "We need to be able to convey instructions, and have them relay what is happening as it unfolds."

Emergency Medical Dispatch training includes techniques that can help to deescalate a panicked caller.

"Understandably, under the circumstance, people are sometimes so upset or hysterical that we have to ask them to find someone else to take over on the phone. But Mike Quinlan was great to work with — I'm sure he was scared and anxious, but he was able to communicate and process information, and to stay focused, to save his wife's life."

Under King's steady, calm direction and encouragement, Mike continued to administer CPR, including mouth-to-mouth resuscitation when hundreds of chest compressions alone did not suffice.

"It felt like five years," Mike recalled solemnly. "But I know it was less than 10 minutes before the first Paramedics arrived."

He recalled that, as the sirens approached, he felt torn about leaving Jennifer's side even just long enough to race to unlock the front door to let the crew in.

The response time was actually less than eight minutes, said Caribou Fire and Ambulance Chief Scott Susi, citing records

documenting the dispatch call at 2:56 a.m., and the first Advanced Cardiac Life Support crews arrival on scene at 3:03 a.m. The patient's initial cardiac monitor reading, time stamped 3:06 a.m., showed ventricular fibrillation — where the heart merely quivers instead of pumping blood.

At this point, in accordance with their protocols, a second Caribou ACLS crew was dispatched to respond to the confirmed

cardiac arrest. Awakened by the commotion, the

Quinlans' 13-year-old daughter Alaina was settled into another part of the house to be spared witnessing her mother in such dire circumstances.

The ambulance crew members included Paramedics Corey Felix, John Thornton, Justin LaPlante, Scott Michaud, and Daniel Raymond; as well as Basic EMT Jonathan Stokely, a student who happened to be riding on this call.

"I'm extremely proud of all of my people," said Susi, who emphasized how teamwork makes all the difference. "With no time wasted, in the end we can look back knowing we were part of the team that provided the full circle of treatment that saved a life."

Thanks to their training, each crew member knew where to station himself and what needed to be done. Medications were administered intraosseously (injected directly into the bone) when it was impossible to start an IV. CPR was restarted and defibrillation was administered as many as six or seven times, until ROSC (Return of Spontaneous Circulation) was achieved.

"I'm so thankful that everyone who helped me that day chose to go into emergency medical services as a line of work"

-JENNIFER QUINLAN, WIFE, MOM AND CARDIAC ARREST SURVIVOR

"After we did everything we could for you, and handed you over to the next caregivers, it was an unforgettably long, quiet ride for all of us back to the station."

-ONE OF THE CARIBOU EMS RESPONDERS