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The Haverhill Gazette

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News

Good samaritans, right equipment save life at country club



Jill Connor/Staff photo — The automatic external defibrillator and emergency oxygen kit in the Haverhill Country Club came in handy last month when a guest had to be resuscitated by a number of local emergency professionals. Shae Baddour, the Country Club's COO was not at the event but said both of the club's AEDs have been used recently to save lives.

Staff Writer

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It was a lucky coincidence for one older gentleman that there were two nurses, two doctors, a retired state trooper and an emergency medical technician at Haverhill Country Club at the same time he collapsed.

The man, described as beng in his 60s, collapsed, and, when found not to have a pulse, was revived by the group of samaritans who all — just by luck — happened to be at the club.

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Not only was there a full medical staff on scene, but the necessary equipment needed to save the man's life — an automatic external defibrillator — was conveniently there as well. Thanks to the kindness of longtime club member and owner of Haverhill Cable & Manufacturing Foster Kneeland who had donated the equipment, a man got a second chance at life.

The scene just before the traumatic incident took place was one of celebration and laughter. The city's director of Human Services, Vincent Ouellette, was there to celebrate his 50th birthday; he planned on dancing the night away with his wife and siblings, one of whom was Mary Valaskatgis, who happened to be an ICU nurse at Merrimack Valley Hospital.

Ouellette's co-worker at the Council on Aging and a friend of Valaskatgis, Sue Najuch, was also at the dance. Najuch, a retired ER nurse and current nurse at the Council on Aging, is also a member of the city's Board of Health. Her husband, Larry Najuch, is an EMT who used to run an ambulance company.

Little did the three know, they were about to help each other save a life.

"He fell right at my feet," Sue Najuch said. "My first thought was that he just fell, so I waited for him to get up. When he didn't, I checked and didn't feel a pulse. I started CPR and that was when the country club (people) asked if I wanted an AED and we said yes."

Najuch and Valaskatgis were impressed the country club had the AED as well as an "ambu bag."

"Kudos to the country club for having great apparatus," Valaskatgis said. "Everyone stayed calm and did their jobs. There was no hysteria and we couldn't have asked for a better scenario. I think every function hall should absolutely have (an AED)."

Doctors Steven Bloom and Thomas Fazio also assisted as retired state trooper, Scott Pare, fired the AED. When placed on an individual's chest, an AED is able to analyze the patient's situation and advise whether a shock is necessary. It tells people to clear away before proceeding to transmit a shock.

"They're wonderful, small, compact and easy to run," Najuch said about AEDs. "You don't need a nursing degree to run them."

"Ambu" bags are a brand of self-inflating bag-valve-mask resuscitators used to provide artificial ventilation to people who are having difficulty breathing or have stopped breathing altogether.

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Kneeland donated two AEDs to the club three years ago. The club's chief operating officer Shae Baddour explained they keep one in the pro shop and one in the clubhouse. This incident wasn't the first time one has been used.

"This was the second time in six months," Baddour explained. "We're two for two. First aid is something that has always been important to us and we make sure we have the right equipment."

Many would call this group, including Kneeland, heroes, but they don't consider themselves that. They were doing what they'd want done for them.

"I just feel like I did what I was trained to do," Najuch said. "I thought (the man) had a guardian angel. There were lots of experienced people around him in this emergency and the country club was proactive having that AED."

Valaskatgis, who helped the man breathe in the early minutes of the ordeal, echoed her friend's remarks.

"I just got up and did what came naturally to me," she said. "He was in my thoughts and prayers all night long. I really couldn't sleep all night."

The dance was able to continue after paramedics arrived to take the man to Merrimack Valley Hospital. Thanks to the group's incredible work, the man was breathing by the time the ambulance arrived and responsive by the time he arrived at the hospital.

The nurses say the man has improved steadily since his Feb. 24 clinical death experience and that his family has sent cards and flowers thanking them for all they did.

Ouellette is proud, but not surprised, by what his sister and co-worker did that scary day.

"They're both very compassionate people dedicated to their work," he said. "It takes a special person to see this (kind of thing) day in and day out. These people are able to push everything aside and perform their tasks, and I'm not sure that I could do that. It reminded the rest of us just how fragile life is; it shook us all up for a while."

All involved hope this story spurs other facilities in Haverhill where lots of people gather on a regular basis to invest in AEDs.

"The key was early defibrillation," Sue Najuch said. "CPR is good, but the early intervention (saved his life)."