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Broken hearts

Devastated parents launch mission to equip schools, public areas with life-saving devices

By Ashly McGlone

SAN DIEGO, Calif. — As Justin Roy sat with his friends at Murrieta Valley High School his junior year, the sound of ambulance sirens resonated in his ears.

Leaning over, he told a friend about his uneasiness.

"I remember hearing the sirens and just having this really weird feeling," Justin said.

Shortly thereafter, the head nurse and school counselor came out and told Justin that his brother, Travis, was in the hospital. His parents were already there.

The sirens Justin heard had been the response to an emergency call from nearby Thompson Middle School, where his 14-year-old brother attended.

Travis suffered from sudden cardiac arrest May 20, 2005. While the school nurse did perform CPR, 23 minutes elapsed before a defibrillator reached Travis and restarted his heart.

He was airlifted to Children's Hospital in San Diego. Travis spent four weeks in the Intensive Care Unit before an MRI revealed extensive brain cell death. He was unable to see, move, speak, chew or swallow. Travis remained in this comatose state until his death on June 25. Travis' parents Robert and Diana were by his side.

For this Christian family, the abrupt loss left them with so many questions for a God they loved and knew was in control, but things didn't make sense.

A couple weeks after Travis died, Robert was sitting out on the patio and while gazing at the evening sky, he talked to the Lord.

"I know you can't tell me why, but I just need to know that he is safe," Robert said in appeal to God. A star immediately shot across the sky.

"That helped to put me at ease," Robert said. "The odds of that happening at that very moment are far too great for that to be a coincidence."

Common disorder

Sudden Cardiac Arrest is the leading cause of death in the United States, claiming 325,000 lives annually, according to the Sudden Cardiac Arrest Association. Every two minutes someone in the United States dies from the disorder—1,000 people daily.

Heart experts, though, are hoping to reduce those numbers through the use of Automatic External Defibrillators. According to the association, clinical trials have shown that the "survival rate almost doubles when AEDs are added to CPR-trained volunteer."

The Red Cross now trains for both CPR and AED usage side-by-side in an effort to prevent such deaths.

"A lot of the time (installing an AED) is a reaction to a tragedy ... We would rather be proactive by getting an AED and getting training," said Elaine-Marie Garcia, lead personal account manager for the San Diego and Imperial County Red Cross chapter.

The AED is a computerized device that can shock a patient's irregular heartbeat

back into regular rhythm.

Robert believes that if an AED had been present at Travis' middle school, his son could've survived. So, his family established the Travis R. Roy Sudden Cardiac Arrest Fund, a non-profit organization whose goal is to "raise awareness so others may survive."

The foundation has successfully placed 100 AEDs in San Diego County schools. Murrieta Valley Unified School District is now a "Heart Safe" district and both Temecula Valley and San Jacinto School Districts are following suit, placing three AEDs at each high school campus, two at each middle school, one at each elementary school, and one at the district office.

In early April, the ministry also donated five new AEDs to Point Loma Nazarene University, where Justin is a student. The AEDs, made by the Zoll Corp., were placed throughout the campus and in public safety patrol vehicles. All officers are trained in using AED's and CPR.

The AEDs donated to PLNU are "so user-friendly. It will even tell you how to do the (CPR) compressions," said Archie Yates, director of public safety.

Increasing access

Robert said he would like to see a law passed in California mandating AEDs on every school campus, as other states have implemented. A 2005 California law does require the installation of AEDs in all health clubs—with the exception of hotels—effective July 1.

"It's funny that children are safer in a health club or 30,000 feet in the air, or at an airport than where they spend most of their waking hours," the father said.

With the ultimate goal of seeing that "AEDs are as accessible as fire extinguishers throughout our county and state," San Diego Project Heartbeat is just one of many distribution programs in the state. San Diego Project Heartbeat, a "self-sustaining program" managed by San Diego Medical Services Enterprise, has saved a total of 43 lives in San Diego County and nearly 3,500 AEDs have been installed through the project with 230 at public schools. With the help of manufacturer Cardiac Science, they hope to double that by next year.

Additional training

Robert also met with the regional director of the American Heart Association July 13 to discuss future projects promoting SCA Awareness and CPR training. On Aug. 8, Robert spoke at a local workplace safety seminar put on by the American Red Cross.†On Sept. 11, he will be speaking at the San Diego Unified School District board meeting, where they are considering an AED program. In January he will be speaking at the annual meeting of the California School Nurses Association in San Diego.

"My faith is what is getting me through all this," Robert said. "Primarily because I know I will see him again. If I didn't have that I'd probably be in a padded room somewhere."

With the combined efforts of Robert Roy and state Assemblyman Ray Haynes, R-Murrieta, Sept. 12 was declared "Sudden Cardiac Arrest Awareness Day" in California. The date was chosen in honor of Travis' birthday.

"It's been 24 months (since Travis' death) but it feels like 24 minutes," Robert said.

ACTION POINT: To contribute to the distribution of AED machines, visit the Travis R. Roy Sudden Cardiac Arrest Fund at www.thetravisfund.org.

