

PLYMOUTH

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Lesson from tragedy averts another Widow's efforts save player, 56, after heart attack

By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff | June 23, 2005

On a December night five years ago, a middle-age man died from a heart attack while playing basketball at the Plymouth South Middle School gym. Across the court, John Welch heard his weekly hoops companion crumple to the hardwood.

Last month, as the 56-year-old Welch caught his breath after a game on the same court, fate took a cruel twist. Welch went into sudden cardiac arrest, his heartbeat sputtering to a quiver. But in the five years since Darryl Furtado died at 48, his widow, Patty, had worked to stay fate's hand.

This time, a device called an automated external defibrillator rested in an alcove only feet away from the gym, and was used to jolt Welch's heart back into rhythm within minutes of the attack. In the aftermath of her husband's death, which she believes could have been prevented if a defibrillator had been on hand, Furtado had joined forces with the school district and Jordan Hospital to bring the machines into the schools. The one at the middle school has been in place since September 2003; its first use was to shock Welch's sputtering heart back to life.

Welch was hospitalized for 12 days, while doctors implanted an internal defibrillator, but suffered no heart damage. The husband and father of two is recovering steadily and expects to resume his normal life, including weekly basketball games, before long. He met Patty Furtado for the first time recently at the middle school, and expressed his deep appreciation for her altruism. She gave him back his life, he said, a gift he hoped would provide some measure of solace from her husband's death.

"I am very grateful to her," he said. "And you can tell she is happy that some good could come from her personal tragedy." Welch said he is also extremely grateful to four members of the basketball league who happened to have been trained to use the device, although it is designed to be used by anyone in an emergency. They also administered cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR.

With two brothers who had nearly identical heart troubles, Welch knows firsthand the medical benefits of defibrillators, computerized devices that automatically gauge a patient's heart rhythm to determine if a shock is needed to reverse ventricular fibrillation, commonly known as "sudden cardiac arrest."

One brother received a defibrillator's electrical jolt within minutes and made a complete recovery. Another did not, and suffered brain damage that impairs his short-term memory.

Furtado takes great satisfaction that the machines she fought to have installed in the Plymouth schools proved their worth.

"It makes me feel really good," Furtado said. "I called my children so excited. I told them, 'We saved a life!' You don't like to say it like that, but . . ."

"You did," Welch said, finishing her thought.

Welch and Furtado shake their heads over the strange way their lives have intersected, and marvel at the parallels between Welch and Furtado's late husband. Neither had previous health problems, though both had family histories of heart troubles. Welch, a lawyer, and Darryl Furtado, a Plymouth police officer, used to meet in court as well as on the basketball floor. Even in death, Furtado is saving lives, Welch said.

"It's like he's still on the job," Welch said.

For Patty Furtado, the mother of three grown children, the demonstration of how defibrillators can save lives serves as a painful reminder that her husband's life might have been saved. But she tries not to dwell on that aspect.

"You have to move on and help others," she said.

She and officials at Jordan Hospital, who trained school employees to use the devices and oversee the program, hope the story will help raise public awareness of defibrillators, and spur a growing campaign to broaden access to them.

New York and Pennsylvania require that the devices be available in all public locations, and a similar bill is now before the Massachusetts Legislature, said Vicki Grisanti, a spokeswoman for the American Heart Association.

Portable defibrillators, which feature two pads attached by wires to an electrical charging device, are more successful at restoring a normal heartbeat than CPR alone. The American Heart Association estimates 50,000 victims of sudden cardiac arrest could be saved each year if defibrillators were more accessible.

Welch said he's seen many of his friends from the basketball league since being released from the hospital, who lighten the mood with "black humor" about whom the court will claim next.

"We actually chose the court because the floor's easier on our knees," he quipped. "We're not young guys anymore."

A month removed from his collapse, of which he has no memory, Welch is philosophical about the quirks of fate that may have given him his life.

"It's like the ripples you get when you throw pebbles in the water," Welch said.

Peter Schworm can be reached at schworm@globe.com. ■