

Caledonia's Wayne Buege thanks many after near-death experience



By Greg Schieber
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Thank you. A simple phrase we learn early in life to be used to show appreciation and gratitude ranging from the simplest things to some of the most important. If someone holds open a door for you, tell them thank you. If you are given a gift, write a thank you note. If a friend wishes you well, say thank you and return the greeting. If someone saves your life, tell them thank you over and over again, because where other words fail to express the debt of gratitude owed, thank you says it all.

For Caledonia resident Wayne Buege, who suffered a heart attack and cardiac arrest Nov. 26, thank yous abounded last Tuesday, as he met the rescuers from the Caledonia Ambulance crew who assisted in saving his life. As he entered the ambulance station to applause, thank you was repeated at least a dozen times before he took a seat to tell his story to an attentive and curious audience.

Buege, a 75 years old retired mail carrier, suffered a heart attack and cardiac arrest, or a stopping of the heart, the day before Thanksgiving while at SEMCAC's senior dining at the United Methodist Church in Caledonia.

In recounting the events, he stated, "the last thing I remember is cleaning the tables. The next thing I knew it was Friday morning."

Previously Buege had no history of heart trouble. Looking back, he recalls a pain in his arm the day before, which he noticed while putting Christmas decorations on the outside of their house.

"I thought it was from lifting the darn thing," he explained. "I thought maybe I pulled a muscle. I felt like I strained myself a little bit."

The slight arm pain, considered by doctors a common heart attack warning sign, stayed with Buege through the night but with no previous heart problems, he never imagined it could be heart related. While cleaning up the church hall after dinner on Wednesday, he began to feel dizzy. Before he could sit down, however, he fell to the floor. Immediately someone called 911. Buege's wife, Gretchen, was in the bathroom when she heard her name being called.

"Wayne just collapsed!" yelled Joyce Bolduan.

Gretchen, alongside Mary Ellen Lapham, approached Wayne and tried to wake him.

"Come on Wayne, come on, wake up!" Gretchen prodded while remaining calm.

Together they began to push on his chest to provide blood circulation. Lapham remembered CPR basics from training years ago when she was a teacher.

"I was on one side and she on the other and I would push on his chest and we were so happy when he would give a big sigh," Lapham explained. "I knew we had to get some air in his lungs."

Within minutes Mike Tornstrom, Caledonia Ambulance director and EMT, arrived on the scene and took over CPR. Moments later the ambulance arrived with Karen Goetzinger, Traci Heaney, and Mary Betz, who brought in the defibrillator and helped with the CPR. The defibrillator, brand new to the department, quickly analyzed Wayne's heart and provided one shock. Less than four minutes later Wayne had a pulse and a couple minutes after that began to breath again by himself. In the meantime, he was loaded into the ambulance and driven toward La Crosse. Caledonia Ambulance met Tri-State Ambulance at the junction of Highways 44 and 20 where he was transferred into their care and was administered stabilizing medications.

Tornstrom explained, "It was the best response we had so quickly. The whole thing was absolutely text

book. Everything went just like clockwork, which we train for, and when it goes well, it's a good thing."

According to the American Heart Association, only 6.4 percent of out-of-hospital cardiac arrest victims survive. The odds were certainly against Buege in that respect. However, the proximity to the ambulance station and quick arrival of help worked in his favor. Tornstrom explained that most important to his survival was the CPR given beforehand by Gretchen and Mary Ellen, a point he expressed repeatedly. To that end, Gretchen was presented with a certificate stating "The Caledonia Ambulance Service honors Mrs. Wayne Buege for her heroic efforts for performing CPR to a cardiac arrest victim. Because of your efforts, the beat goes on." Mary Ellen Lapham will receive a similar certificate for her efforts as well.

Buege remained in the hospital for a week before being released. Gretchen recalled the first words Wayne spoke after waking up being, "Did I fall down? Am I in the hospital?"

When someone asked Buege if he felt any pain in his chest afterwards from the CPR, he responded that he did not, only to be quickly corrected by Gretchen.

"Now you just don't remember. When you were in the hospital you were coughing and doing an awful lot of complaining about the pain."

Doctors gave Buege a pace maker and internal defibrillator. He says he feels good now, and aside from a few extra medications, life for Buege continues on like before. When asked if anything has changed since the incident, he said he cut back on the amount of salt he puts on his food.

He continued, stating, "You don't take it for granted like you used to." Whether or not that was in reference to salted food, or life in general, one can clearly see the joy of life in Wayne's smile these days.

Tornstrom described the evening and the opportunity to meet Mr. and Mrs. Buege as inspiring.

"So many times we run ambulance calls and wonder how things turn out," Tornstrom said. "Many times we run calls and are the ones who care for people at the most unfortunate time in their life and you never know what happens after that. It is an honor for us. Inspiring, very inspiring."

The approximately 20 Caledonia Ambulance EMTs and First Responders present used the opportunity to ask Buege questions and learn more about his symptoms and experiences afterwards.

Citing Buege's full recovery as an indicator of Caledonia Ambulance's effectiveness coupled with a record 341 ambulance runs in 2008, Tornstrom sees the Caledonia Ambulance service as a must have for the community. Right now the city has a contract with Tri-State ambulance to provide advanced medical attention such as Buege received in route to the hospital.

"We are the people from the community serving the people from our community, explained Tornstrom. "The way the system works now is designed perfectly."

Now that Wayne is no longer in the hospital, Gretchen has breathed a sigh of relief. She mentioned the seriousness of the matter never really hit her until they were home again and things calmed down. Throughout the hospital stay, she maintained an optimistic and strong willed attitude from the moment Wayne collapsed and she demanded he wake up.

Commenting on her involvement, Lapham stated, "I think Wayne has given me a lot of credit but I don't know if I deserve it. He even brought me over some Christmas cookies."

While to most people, a life seems worth much more than a simple thank you and plate of Christmas cookies, to Caledonia Ambulance personnel, Lapham, and Gretchen, seeing Wayne smiling and back on his feet is all the thank you they need.

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