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Woman promotes awareness, action for cardiac arrest

Sunday, October 01, 2006

By A.J. Caliendo

Maybe Mary Newman should have been a juggler. After all, she has spent much of her adult life deftly keeping several balls in the air at one time.

She is, however, the co-founder and president of the Sudden Cardiac Arrest Foundation, a nonprofit organization she operates from her home in Pine. The organization helps educate people about the dangers of sudden cardiac arrest and what can be done to save the lives of many of its 250,000 annual victims, more than the combined death toll from colorectal, breast or prostate cancer; AIDS; car accidents; house fires; and gunshot wounds.

"SCA is a treatable condition. It need not be fatal," Ms. Newman said, explaining that cardiac arrest is usually caused by an interruption of the heart's natural rhythm, which can be quickly reversed with simple training and equipment.

While raising four children, Ms. Newman has crisscrossed the northeastern states, getting involved in saving lives along the way.

After graduating from high school in Danbury, Conn., she attended a small college in the Boston area, married her high school sweetheart, then transferred to the University of Cincinnati, where, taking breaks to have her children, she graduated in 1977. When the family moved back to Boston a year later, Ms. Newman took a one-year emergency medical training course.



Bob Donaldson, Post-Gazette Mary Newman, executive director of the Sudden Cardiac Arrest Foundation, runs the organization from an office in her Pine home. Click photo for larger image.

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"I took EMT training mainly because I thought it was something I could do for my children," she said.

She found, however, that her training also could benefit others. After moving to New Jersey in 1978, she became a volunteer instructor in cardiopulmonary resuscitation at the local chapter of the American Heart Association.

At the same time, she began to write for newspapers and a medical trade publication, Journal of Emergency Medical Services. A short time later, she took a part-time position as a cardiac arrest researcher with Laerdal Medical Co., where she developed the phrase "chain of survival," referring to the steps that must be taken to save a cardiac arrest victim.

By the mid-1980s, the family had moved to Carmel, Ind., where she co-founded an emergency medicine newsletter called Currents in Emergency Cardiac Care.

When her marriage ended in 1996, she took a position as a research assistant at Indiana University's Krannert Institute of Cardiology. There, she met Dr. Paul Paris, who, in 2000, invited her to come to Pittsburgh to help start an organization that eventually became the National Center for Early Defibrillation, a group that promoted awareness of the signs of cardiac arrest, the training of people to help save victim's lives and the placement of automatic external defibrillators, or AEDs, in public places. Ms. Newman, who served as executive director, points to one particular achievement at the center that she holds dear.

"Probably the most rewarding thing that we did was to set up the Survivor Network," she said, referring to the 42 cardiac arrest survivors who came together at a conference in 2003 in Washington, D.C., to meet with emergency medical professionals and responders to increase the number of cardiac arrest victims who are saved.

After the National Center for Early Defibrillation moved its focus to advocacy and its headquarters to Washington, D.C., Ms. Newman decided to continue to promote awareness of the unnecessary loss of life caused by sudden cardiac arrest. That led to the founding of the SCA Foundation this year.

"The survival rate is only 7 percent nationwide," Ms. Newman said. "But in areas where concerted efforts have been made to train responders in CPR and the use of AEDs, survival rates have reached as high as 43 percent."

Ms. Newman said her foundation is dedicated to improving that figure. In the coming months, the foundation will increase and update its fledgling online service, through which survivors can join in the public awareness program. The group plans to target inner-city communities, where the concentration of African-Americans presents an increased risk for death by cardiac arrest.

"It may be because of underlying health issues," she said of the risk factor.

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"But it's also because of a lack of AEDs [in inner-city neighborhoods]."

To learn more about the Sudden Cardiac Arrest Foundation and cardiac arrest, log onto www.sca-aware.org.

(A.J. Caliendo is a freelance writer.)

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