



The Greatest Gift

By Brian Goff, *EMSCI #253*
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Through tears and with a cracking voice she said, “You’ve given us the gift of time.” Everyone in the room was an experienced Emergency Medical Services professional, and in their many years of service, they had seen both horrors and joys. They are skilled and strong, and not quick to attach themselves emotionally to their work. But on this day, in this room, at these words, not one eye was dry. You see, she was the wife of a marathon runner who had collapsed in sudden cardiac arrest during a half-marathon a few weeks earlier. Standing beside her was her husband – the man whom these same EMS professionals had worked so feverishly to resuscitate that fateful day.

Sporting events within the Reedy Creek Improvement District attract many thousands of competitors, and January 8, 2011, was no exception: twenty-eight thousand runners had converged to participate in a half-marathon race. No stranger to providing EMS coverage to large groups, the Reedy Creek Fire Department was well prepared. EMS would be provided by more than forty personnel assigned to nineteen different units, most of which would be strategically deployed along the 13.1 mile course. There would be four bike teams on duty that day; their assignment was to patrol the course, providing medical assistance and moral support to the competitors, as well as public relations for the department.

The event progressed like so many others had in years past. Crews watched the runners pass by, often wondering why anyone would awaken so early in the morning in order to punish their bodies. EMS bicycle teams patrolled their assigned areas, obliging curious questions from those who had never seen EMS delivered via bicycle. It was an otherwise unremarkable event – until bike team Paramedic Tom Murphy and EMT Samantha Zaino pedaled up to mile marker number ten. While investigating a report of a runner needing assistance, Tom and Samantha heard calls for help emanating from another direction. They arrived at a runner’s side just moments after he suffered a sudden cardiac arrest. Their knowledge, skills, and years of experience came into play as they simultaneously called for backup and began an aggressive resuscitative effort, which included making use of bystanders to assist with CPR. Despite dense pedestrian crowds and closed roadways, it took only minutes for the first rescue unit to arrive on the scene. By that time, the patient had been defibrillated four times, was intubated, IV access was established, and drug therapy had begun.

As additional units arrived on the scene, emergency care continued; the patient was packaged for transport and moved to the Rescue Unit. The resuscitative effort continued all the way to the emergency room, and included use of an automatic chest compression device as well as four more defibrillating shocks. At the time of transfer to emergency room staff, the patient continued to fluctuate between full cardiac arrest and return of spontaneous circulation and respiration. The patient was later transferred to a larger hospital campus and underwent hypothermic therapy and an induced coma. Surgical replacement of a defective aortic valve was performed and after twenty-three days, the patient was discharged with full neurological recovery!

Now staying in a hotel instead of a hospital room, the survivor pondered his situation and concluded what so few do: thanks were due to the EMS professionals who helped him. After a few phone calls, the survivor and his family visited the fire station to meet his rescuers and to express their thanks. It was a truly humbling experience to meet and converse with a man who had defied death and to hear his newfound perspective on life. All conversation stopped as he was introduced to Tom and Samantha, and they shared warm, heartfelt hugs. The same was true as the survivor was introduced to the Rescue Unit personnel and others involved in his resuscitation.



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Listening to the survivor talk about his family and his future plans gave us all cause to consider our own fortunes and to find new appreciation for them. He explained his new outlook on life: slow down and refocus on the relationships that make life meaningful, and we were inspired to do the same. So infrequently in one's EMS career does the opportunity arise to truly influence another human being's life; this was a rare and cherished meeting indeed. Souls were joined as we laid eyes upon each other and considered the brief moments in which our lives' paths had crossed. It was a vivid and stoic reminder about why we chose this career.

EMS cyclists are well-versed in the many benefits of bike teams. On this day, we were reminded about why we must continue the effort for support and funding, no matter the obstacle. Had the bike team not been there that cool January morning, the outcome of this incident would have undoubtedly been tragically different. Their ability to penetrate the dense pedestrian crowd to deliver immediate Advanced Life Support is the reason this victim survived.

For many years the Reedy Creek Fire Department bike team has been serving its citizens with a different kind of EMS service: one that is visible and conspicuous, delivers customer service more so than emergency medicine, and proactively seeks opportunities to serve instead of waiting for a 911 call. This community outreach involves the commitment of many resources, both human and financial. But on January 8, 2011, for this citizen and his family, all the money spent on supplies and payroll, all the hours spent training, and all the miles pedaled became priceless, as he was given the gift of time.

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