Lifesaving rescue

By SEAN EMERY
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IRVINE Gregg Saben has heart, and thanks to the quick action of two Irvine teachers and a middle school principal, that heart is still beating.

If it weren't for the heroics of South Lake Middle School teachers Gregg Campbell and Julie Ho, along with Principal Bruce Baron, Saben's parents say Gregg, 13, would most likely not have survived a sudden cardiac arrest during a physical education class.

Instead, Gregg has already returned to his normal school routine, a little more than two weeks after collapsing on a school track.

The Emergency

It began just before noon April 28 with the typical physical education routine at South Lake Middle School, with Campbell and Ho watching the seventh-grade students warm up with a half-mile jog, cheering the runners on and waiting to high-five them at the finish line.

Suddenly a group of 20 or so students came to an abrupt stop, gathering around a fallen runner. Campbell and Ho ran over, thinking that someone had likely fallen and broken a bone, but quickly realized that the situation was far more serious.

Gregg was down on the ground turning purple and blue, his eyes rolled back in his head. Ho dropped down and began rescue breathing as Campbell dialed 911 on his cell phone.

Throwing down his phone, Campbell knelt down and felt for a pulse. Finding none, he began compressing Gregg's chest as Ho continued with the breathing.

Word reached the school's main office, and Principal Bruce Baron ran out to the track. Baron took over for Ho, assisting with Gregg's breathing as Campbell continued with the chest compressions.

“There was a point I could see he wasn't coming around, and I was yelling at him, trying to do whatever I could to get his attention,” Campbell said. “I said ‘this is Mr. Campbell, and you are staying with us.' I was hoping he would think ‘this is my PE teacher, I'm not supposed to be doing this.'”

Eleven long minutes after the 911 call, paramedics arrived. Baron jumped in the ambulance as it raced Gregg to Kaiser Hospital. School officials called Gregg's parents, Heather and Brian Saben, telling them that their son was on the way to the emergency room.

The recovery

Doctors and police, initially uncertain whether Gregg would pull through, tried to comfort the teachers.

“They said, ‘you guys got him going long enough to get him to a hospital. It is out of your hands now,'” Baron said.

Gregg's condition rapidly improved, however, and within an hour he was stabilized and showing signs of responding to doctors and family.

“One of the officers took off his lapel pin and said ‘we're in the same club now.' I asked ‘what club is that?' and he said ‘the lifesavers club,” and handed (the pin) to us,” Campbell said. “As I walked out, his dad looked at me and said thank you. I said ‘you would have done it for my kid.' The next day, he came up to me and said ‘I would have done it for your kid.' That is all you needed to know.”

Doctors the next day were already predicting a full recovery, Baron said. By Friday, May 1, Gregg's hospital room was filled with family members and food, the teachers said.

“That was a party. That was a celebration,” Ho said.

“He was eating pizza and candy, and it was two days after it happened,” Campbell added, laughing.

The return

The last thing Gregg, 13, remembered was running, a sudden pain in his chest, then the strange sensation of waking up in a hospital room, unsure of where he was. His memory of the weeklong stay at Children's Hospital of Orange County is also shaky, thanks to a temporary bout with short-term memory loss.

After a few days resting at home, Gregg said he was eager to go back to school. Baron met with the family before Gregg's first class back, helping to coach him on how to respond to questions from classmates.

“I probably would have been clueless on what to say,” Gregg said. “I'm feeling a lot better.”

His parents still aren't sure what caused the cardiac arrest, noting that doctors haven't found a pre-existing condition.

The danger

While Gregg's story had a happy ending, many students who suffer serious cardiac attacks aren't so lucky. Three Orange County High School athletes with undiagnosed heart conditions died during the 2007-08 school year alone.

“Most of the sudden deaths in schools are heart-related.” said Dr. Anthony Chang, medical director of the heart institute at Children's Hospital of Orange County.

Chang stressed the importance of proper screenings and computerized records combined with CPR training for teachers and students.