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Local News

# Honolii's heroes

## *Lifeguards are recognized for saving surfer with heart condition*

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Lifeguards John Baehr and Paul Kealoha sit with Megan Silva on the stretch of Honolii beach where the lifeguards pulled her ashore after she collapsed on her surfboard in January. - Peter Sur/Tribune-Herald

Megan Silva realizes now they were all warning signs: the headache, nausea, blurred vision -- and the way she didn't notice much of what was happening around her.

But Silva, 33, had battled the symptoms on and off for over a decade, so she did what she normally would do: head to Honolii Beach with her surfboard and let the brine wash away the pain and disorientation.

She was headed to one of the worst places you can be when everything goes wrong -- in the water.

Silva dove in and started paddling. That's all she remembers. Three days and one dramatic rescue later, she woke up in the hospital.

"The guy in front was paddling out and for some reason he looked back," Silva said. "He saw my eyes roll up and I rolled off my board and went under. I fainted. It's a bad place to faint."

Silva's brush with death may have been a blessing in disguise, because that was when she found out that a heart murmur had been slowly and steadily robbing her brain of oxygen.

Surfer Kalae Schilling, believed to be 18, got to Silva first and grabbed her as she went under. A mainland visitor was second on the scene and the two began the difficult process of keeping Silva on the surface. That's when lifeguards Paul Kealoha and John Baehr spotted them.

"Any time people gather around like that, there's something going on, people hurt," Kealoha said.

The lifeguards gave Silva rescue breaths and used a boogie board to bring her in from 200 yards offshore.

"You're trying to figure out why and what, how they're injured and where," said Baehr, describing what went through his mind during the rescue. "You don't want to manhandle them."

Three minutes later, the lifeguards had Silva on the grass and were administering CPR with the help of an off-duty firefighter. They gave her two shocks with an automated external defibrillator to get her heart beating again.

"I'm so thankful it was the two senior lifeguards, really experienced," Silva said.

Silva is a sixth-wgrade social studies teacher at Waiakea Intermediate School. A mother of two, she's been surfing since she was 14. She was also on medication for her heart murmur from age 4 to 19, when doctors told her she didn't need to take her medicine anymore.

The incident in late January underscores the importance of knowing CPR and being familiar with the lifesaving capabilities of AEDs -- hand-held devices which diagnose cardiac arrhythmia and deliver an electric shock that allows the heart to reestablish a proper rhythm.

This week is National CPR/AED Awareness Week, as the sun cranks up the heat and people head out to the water and other summer exercise.

Tuesday, the American Heart Association honored Kealoha and Baehr with Heartsaver Hero Award certificates. Residents involved in the rescue were also recognized in the ceremony at Honolii.

"What made this successful was it was so close and we saw this from the very beginning," said Hawaii County Fire Capt. John Kapsky, who oversees lifeguard services in East Hawaii.

Lifeguard Ekahi Douglas was honored as well. Last fall, a man in his mid-50s collapsed in cardiac arrest at a pavilion in Pohoiki. Douglas rushed to the aid of the man, who had lost breath, pulse and consciousness. Douglas shocked the patient four times with an AED and was able to keep him alive until the ambulance arrived. The man made a full recovery.

"I think it's nice when we can recognize our lifeguards for keeping us safe. The outcome could have been a lot different if CPR and AEDs hadn't been available," said Shauna Tuohy, regional director of the Heart Association.

The lifeguards can be found keeping an eye out on East Hawaii beaches. Schilling is more elusive. Silva hasn't been able to find him again.

"Turns out his cousin was one of my students. I've heard he's done this for another person before. I was just so stoked he was there for me," she said.

Four months later, Silva is back on her heart medicine. Gone are the migraines, blurred vision, nausea. Even the Tylenol. "I used to take it like candy," she said.

"It's ironic the way things turn out."

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