

Cardiac arrest survivor cites co-worker's quick action and CPR training for his renewed lease on life

April 8, 2009 began as a routine day for Jim Clark, a heavy equipment operator at the City of Ottawa's Scrivens Road Works Garage. That day would surely have ended in tragedy had it not been for the quick-thinking actions of his well-trained co-workers, Craig McCooeye and Bruce Crate.

Clark, a 22-year veteran of the municipal workforce, remembers having just stepped through the door leading into the garage before waking up in the University of Ottawa Heart Institute, confused, in pain, but alive.

After entering the garage, Clark had suffered a cardiac arrest, collapsing to the cold concrete floor. Simply put, his heart had suddenly (and without warning) stopped beating, ceasing circulation of the blood and causing an instant loss of consciousness and cessation of breathing. As with every cardiac arrest victim, death was a certainty unless proper treatment was administered within just a few minutes.

Luckily for Clark, a co-worker saw him collapse and called out to the workers in the nearby lunchroom for help. McCooeye and Crate, both 12-year municipal employees hired just a week apart, reached Clark, determined that he was not breathing and had no pulse, and began CPR within one minute of his collapse. Fresh from a CPR training course offered by the Ottawa Paramedic Service just a few weeks earlier, the two men worked valiantly to keep oxygenated blood flowing to Clark's organs while waiting for help to arrive. It would be 12 minutes before responders from the Metcalfe Fire Station 91 arrived on scene to take over.

“Those 12 minutes seemed like an hour,” said McCooeye recently.

The firefighters defibrillated Clark once before the ambulance arrived; paramedics then took over the job of saving Clark's life, defibrillating him two more times before he was airlifted to hospital.

Clark can now relate the events that followed his collapse by piecing together the stories told to him by co-workers, rescuers, doctors and family. Speaking about that harrowing day on the eve of its one-year anniversary, Clark has nothing but praise for his fellow workers who quickly leapt into action to prevent a tragedy.

“Bruce and Craig didn't hesitate – I was only out a minute before they started CPR,” said Clark. “I was taken to the Heart Institute and spent a week in a coma while they put in two stents (to open up blocked arteries). The left part of my heart had stopped – as soon as they opened up (the arteries), it started pumping again.”

Once Clark regained consciousness, he was puzzled as to why his rib cage was hurting so much. It was only after asking a doctor that he found out that several ribs had been broken during the extended period of CPR. Such was the extent of his co-worker's determination to save their friend.

At a June 1, 2009 meeting of the city's Community and Protective Services Committee, McCooeye and Crate, standing alongside Clark, were each presented with a Certificate Award for Heroism. The staff at the Scrivens Road Works Garage were also praised for encouraging the two men during their strenuous 12-minute CPR session, and for contacting Clark's wife and accompanying her to the hospital.

Clark had the opportunity to shake hands with the members of the Metcalfe Fire Station at their annual Fireman's Banquet, which he was invited to as a special guest.

One year later, Clark is still recovering from his cardiac arrest, but is gradually increasing his strength and stamina through exercise and learning useful tips from doctors about food choices and how they can affect the performance of his heart medications. He sees the men who saved his life each day when he goes to work on Scrivens Road, men who now know the life-saving power that proper CPR training can bring to an individual.

"It's a good thing to know," said McCooeye. "It applies anywhere."

Surviving such a close brush with death has given Clark a new appreciation of life, and brought him even closer to the people around him. Each day he steps over the spot on the garage floor where it happened and, almost every day, he pauses to reflect.

"Hardly a day goes by when I don't think about it and be thankful (McCooeye and Crate) were there to help me," said Clark.

CUPE 503 President, Brian Madden stated that he is very proud of their life-saving actions and will be presenting the members with plaques of appreciation, in order to honor them.