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Hawaii News

EMS Week brings rejuvenation full circle

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Philip Tan, right, talked with Lance Aimoto, left, Lorrin Okumura and Jenna Altomare of the city's Emergency Medical Services on Monday at the Nuuanu YMCA, where Tan collapsed in cardiac arrest in February.

Philip Tan collapsed while sitting on a bench after playing basketball at the Nuuanu YMCA, and his head landed on David Kim's thigh, which may have saved the 51-year-old bank trust officer's life.

Kim, 35, a physical therapist, saw Tan wasn't breathing and that his lips were turning blue. Tan had no pulse, so Kim called for help from others in the gym and began giving Tan chest compressions.

YMCA staff brought over a portable defibrillator that delivered a shock and restarted Tan's heart. Shortly afterward an emergency medical service crew arrived, assumed medical care and took Tan in serious condition to the Queen's Medical Center.

On Monday to kick off National Emergency Medical Services Week, Tan was able to sink a few baskets during a ceremony at the same YMCA where he collapsed in February.

National Emergency Medical Services Week recognizes EMS workers as a key part of the public health safety net.

"What a relief to have EMS there," said Kim about seeing the EMS crew arrive to help Tan.

Kim said he and Mark Yanai gave CPR to Tan for about five minutes before Tan regained consciousness. But once Tan woke up, Kim didn't know what else to do until EMS arrived.

For emergency medical technician Molly Swanson, it was her first time meeting Tan since she treated him at the YMCA. EMS workers usually don't meet patients after they take them to a hospital, and Swanson was rejuvenated by the encounter.

It can be emotionally draining to see a bad car crash or to see people daily when they are their most frightened or feeling their worst.

"It weighs on you," she said, adding that she appreciated the opportunity "to see that something you did for someone helped get them back to their family and friends."

"It makes you want to come to work even more," she said.

About 245 emergency medical services personnel work 12-hour shifts on Oahu, staffing the island's 20 ambulance units. Last year they responded to about 80,000 calls.

Swanson described Tan's incident as a textbook "perfect" case because of the good Samaritans waiting outside the building to flag down the ambulance, civilians being trained in CPR, the availability of a portable defibrillator and volunteers knowing how to use it.

Tan's daughter, Samantha, said her father was fortunate to collapse at the YMCA because there was a defibrillator and others who knew CPR at the scene.

Tan said he had taken care of himself physically, playing basketball and having regular physicals that never alerted him to health problems. But after his cardiac arrest,

doctors found one completely blocked artery and two other arteries more than 75 percent blocked.

Tan underwent triple-bypass surgery, had a miniature defibrillator implanted in his chest and is still recovering.

He recalled feeling dizzy after the basketball game and standing up to catch his breath, then passing out. He woke up to the “violent” action of someone giving him CPR and said he would have died without immediate help from Kim, Yanai and others.

He was grateful to the EMS crew for giving him advanced care and keeping him talking, which helped him regain his strength.

Tan said he now wants to learn CPR in case he can help someone else in trouble.