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Novice provider sizes up situation, saves man's life

By *JOSEPH G. COTE* Staff Writer

NASHUA – So far, as Rick Joyner is concerned, Wednesday, July 7, should have been the last day of his life.

"If it wasn't for Healthy at Home and their employee, I wouldn't be here today," Joyner said. "(Doctors) told me it was pretty much a miracle that I survived."

The disabled 42-year-old Nashua resident remembers waking up around 7 a.m. that day, taking a shower and then eating breakfast. He remembers sitting down on his bed and putting on his socks on and starting to prepare his daily insulin injection. The next thing he remembers is waking up with Nashua firefighters surrounding him working frantically to raise his oxygen levels.

In the intervening time, Joyner's personal care aide, Shareen Burns, arrived for her regular appointment at Joyner's home and found him unconscious on the bed, turning a deeper and deeper shade of blue.

Burns, a 21-year-old Nashua resident, snapped into action.

Joyner said she noticed the syringes and insulin nearby and thought perhaps Joyner's diabetes was the cause of whatever was happening. She could see he was breathing but still turning blue so she turned on his C-Pap machine – a device used by some sleep apnea sufferers – and activated a life alert systems that called emergency workers. She kept Joyner breathing with the C-Pap machine, which forces air into his lungs, until firefighters and EMTs arrived, she said.

"I work well under pressure," Burns said. "When there's something I know is an emergency, I just think what needs to be done and that's it. I just do what I was taught to do."

What she was taught was still fresh in her mind. Burns had completed her training as a personal care service provider through Healthy at Home about an hour before she arrived at Joyner's home. She has worked at the company for about a month.

Healthy at Home, a division of Harbor Homes, provides home aides to the elderly and disabled so they can remain independent and in their own homes.

Joyner suffers from a number of conditions that when combined have made him disabled. He weighs 445 pounds – down from 660 pounds a little more than two years ago – as well as diabetes, sleep apnea and a sleeping disorder. He has to wear braces to walk because his knees are in such bad condition, he said. Burns visits Joyner each week to help him take walks and takes care of any minor medical concerns he has. She also goes grocery shopping for him and does laundry because he can't get downstairs to the washing machine, Joyner said.

Burns said she is working on becoming a licensed nurse assistant and eventually a registered nurse. Her experience with her grandmother pushed Burns into the field. In 2005, her grandmother, a Boston area resident, fell in her home and wasn't found for two days. During that time she developed pneumonia and eventually died. Burns said it was only after that experience that she learned about Healthy at Home and other home health agencies that could have helped.

"It kind of hit a soft spot for me," she said. "I can't help my grandmother now, so I guess I'll help other people."

Joyner said Burns did a lot more than just help him. She saved his life.

"It was amazing," he said. "If she was going to be even 10 minutes later, I wouldn't be here. This is, I guess, a second chance at life."

Joyner was taken to Southern New Hampshire Medical Center and spent two mostly unconscious days in the intensive care unit. He woke up for a few seconds a couple of times, he said, and then woke up for good Friday, July 9, and was moved out of the ICU. He was released from the hospital the next day, he said.

Doctors told Joyner that although he was breathing, he wasn't getting enough oxygen into his blood stream. His oxygen levels were about 41 percent of what they should have been, he was told.

"They really couldn't figure out what really made my oxygen level drop so much," he said.

Joyner isn't exaggerating about being dead if not for Burns. Healthy at Home administrator Linda Carter said with oxygen levels that low, he certainly could have died if he wasn't found quickly.

"He definitely would not be with us today, and if he was, he'd have a lot of brain damage," she said.

Carter said the organization does its own in-house training when they hire new employees so they are prepared. But, she said, Burns' cool-under-pressure reaction was still not typical.

"It was definitely special," Carter said. "We were all stunned that she even knew what to do."

The training includes everything from CPR and how to recognize respiratory distress to how to measure a client for a cane or walker and the proper way to help them dress, Carter said.

"The extra training gave her the skills ... it brought it to her consciousness that something wasn't right," she said. "I really do credit it to the extra education we provide. We don't just hire someone and send them out."

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