

The Best of Community Partnerships

How an emergency medical course is saving lives

BY MARY FETSCH

On his way to a Valentine's Day dinner, 17-year-old Jake Stephenson and his girlfriend were taking I-65 to a restaurant in Merrillville. When the traffic came to a sudden halt, he was able to slam on his brakes to avoid hitting the car ahead of him. In his rearview mirror, he could see a truck swerve quickly to avoid hitting him, but the car behind the truck would not be as lucky.

"The impact was like BOOM!" recalls Stephenson. His head hit the steering wheel before he whiplashed back and was hit in the face again with the airbag and other debris from the dashboard. "I was dazed," he says. "Our seats got pushed backwards and when I opened my eyes, I could see blood dripping down my right arm."

Stephenson soon realized it was blood coming out of a laceration from his girlfriend's head resting on his shoulder.

In recalling the moments after impact, the Portage High School senior sounded like a medical professional. He automatically went through a series of mental evaluations of the scene: His girlfriend was unresponsive but breathing and bleeding from the head. Smoke coming from the car that hit them made it imperative that he remove both himself and his girlfriend from the vehicle as quickly as possible. With assistance from another driver, Stephenson was able to force the passenger door open, place a sweatshirt over the laceration on his girlfriend's head and pull her from the vehicle.

"When I knew we had to move her, I just automatically did what we learned in class to protect her neck and spine," Stephenson says. "We moved her to another car and immediately started putting pressure on her head to slow the bleeding. It was crazy, but my training just kicked in."

REAL-WORLD TRAINING

Stephenson's training came from a high school course in emergency medical training (EMT) offered through Hobart High School. It was made possible through the creative thinking of the superintendent of the School City of Hobart, Peggy Buffington, PhD, and support from St. Mary Medical Center.

"Our goal for offering classes like this is to provide as many real-world experiences as possible," says Buffington. "Without the clinical partnership with St. Mary Medical Center, this class would lack real hands-on experience. Those experiences help students find their passion in life. They go through the clinicals and see how what they've learned is translated into saving lives."



Through a clinical partnership with St. Mary Medical Center, students like Jake Stephenson get hands-on experience that can translate into saving lives.

Nearly 10 years ago, Buffington and members of the Hobart Fire Department began developing a fire science class that would help prepare future volunteer firefighters.

“But as the fire chief and I spoke, it became clear that the majority of calls that came into the department were for medical emergencies,” Buffington adds. “I realized that we should develop the program to include medical and health professionals to help prepare students for careers that offer a steady labor market and demand for jobs. We now just needed the experts in their fields to help deliver the curriculum.”

Enter St. Mary Medical Center and Chief Executive Officer Janice Ryba, in 2008.

“Our hospital has always been a strong community partner throughout the years,” Ryba says. “But when Dr. Buffington presented an opportunity for us to work with the School City of Hobart and support educating future healthcare workers, we recognized the potential long-term benefits.”

● OPENING OPPORTUNITIES

“Janice and I sat down and thoughtfully discussed what the partnership should look like,” Buffington says. “We needed an expert to deliver the curriculum, but I didn’t need an employee 365 days a year. So we looked at how we could share this person who could train these future healthcare professionals and community responders. Then the partnership took off. Today, the hospital not only supports the EMT class but also classes for kids who want to go on to medical careers. This partnership has opened up all kinds of opportunities for our students.”

The EMT course is made available to students from 10 Northwest Indiana high schools through Porter County Career and Technical Education services. Course instructor Jeff Lawley also serves on a subcommittee of the EMS Commission for the State of Indiana tasked with replicating the program in other systems across the state.

“Dr. Buffington and Janice had this foresight in 2008,” Lawley says. “From my perspective they were on the cutting edge of what the State of Indiana EMS Commission is trying to replicate in 2013—to create partnerships that focus on promoting the careers, education and successful training of qualified emergency medical personnel.”

“There has to be a willingness to partner from all levels,” Buffington says. “And you have to find the resources. By figuring out how we can run this program together and make it work so we can both



Superintendent Peggy Buffington, PhD (left), of the School City of Hobart, and course instructor Jeff Lawley, stand in front of the ambulance “classroom” that provides hands-on experience for students in the Emergency Medical Training course at Hobart High School. Buffington purchased the used ambulance on eBay as a less-expensive alternative to equipping a simulated environment in the classroom.

benefit is the masterful side of this. We looked at it from the perspective that we are educating the future workforce in healthcare, especially in Lake and Porter counties. That is what led us down this path.”

From all accounts, the program is having a much more immediate impact on the community. Thanks to his clear thinking, Stephenson and his girlfriend were treated for their injuries and released from the hospital later that night.

“We hear stories like Jake’s all the time,” Buffington says. “How they have come across or find themselves in these situations—on basketball courts, at soccer games, in car accidents—and are able to stabilize the situation, keep cool and calm and help others. I smile because these are high school students who are already going above and beyond our expectations. I think that bodes well for our future.” ●

CALL

Interested in Emergency Medical Training?

EMT and paramedic courses are also available for adults through St. Mary Medical Center’s EMS Institute. For more information, contact Robert Boby, RN, EMS manager, or Jessica Lawley at **219-947-6874**, or visit us online at **www.comhs.org/stmary**.

