

Good Afternoon. For those of you who do not know me, I am Ryan Collins. I am here today to help kick-off your American Heart Association “Heart Walk” campaign. Let me see a show of hands: How many of you in attendance know CPR? Has anyone ever had to use their training? Does anyone know what an AED is or how to use one?

Thursday, January 22, 2009. A Thursday like any other Thursday I had ever had in my life. It was so typical; in fact, it could have been called boring. I went to class, I ate lunch, I hung out with my friends for a little bit on campus, and then I hopped in the car to head to rehearsal for Robert Morris University’s upcoming production of *Godspell*. The rehearsal itself was nothing out of the ordinary, just sitting around singing through some of the music from the show. As practice came to close, I got up to leave with the rest of my cast mates. At this point, a typical, normal, average Thursday night turned into a night that changed my life forever.

Just as I made it out the door and into the hall, I fell to the ground. My friends, knowing my knack for mischief and jokes, assumed it was just that: a joke. But then they noticed something wasn’t quite right – I started turning purple, I wasn’t breathing, I had no pulse.

Within seconds my friends began to act. While one person ran across the street to the police station, another ran into a separate rehearsal room to see if anyone knew CPR, and was lucky enough to find two who did. These two individuals performed chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth on me for more than ten minutes. When the paramedics arrived, they quickly pulled out their AED, cut open my shirt, attached the electrodes to my chest, and shocked me with it several times before I regained some semblance of a heart rhythm. Soon after, I was placed on a stretcher and wheeled off to the ambulance which then rushed me to the emergency room.

For the next week I was completely unconscious, placed in a drug-induced coma by doctors while machines controlled all of my bodily functions. During this time, the doctors held out very little hope of my survival. My heart output was at 10 percent; a person requires at least 60 percent to sustain life and at least 80 percent to live without some artificial aid. On about the sixth day, I miraculously began to turn the corner. My vital signs began to improve and I woke up to my parents standing over me in my hospital bed; I was completely confused, didn't know where I was, and had no recollection at all of what had happened. Even though I was pretty hazy from all the medication, it was then that my mom and dad explained everything to me.

What had happened was I had suffered sudden cardiac arrest. Literally, my heart just stopped beating. Doctors still aren't exactly sure what caused it to happen in the first place, but they seem to think an electrical issue in my heart produced arrhythmia, or an irregular heartbeat, which in turn eventually led to cardiac arrest. As the story unfolded from my parents' retelling, it seemed incredibly surreal to me, like this wasn't happening, like it was all a very bad dream. I was an incredibly healthy person who never took sick; so healthy, in fact, that I had never missed a day of school in my life, from kindergarten all the way through senior year of high school. On top of that, I was athletic, I worked out several times a week, I ate well, I had a good sleep schedule, and I wasn't a smoker. How could something like this happen to a person like me?

In total, I spent 19 days in the hospital undergoing various procedures, including having a defibrillator implanted in my chest, and another week at home recovering. Over the next six months, I returned to the hospital several times for more surgeries, even having to travel to Johns Hopkins for one of them. I had lost 20 pounds during the course of my initial hospital stay. I missed about a month of classes, even having to drop one of them. I had to take three different pills twice a day. I was not allowed to drive for six months. I had several dietary restrictions,

which included watching my caffeine intake. I had to be incredibly careful not to over exert myself. Walking up a flight of stairs left me out of breath. It took me a while to regain my footing, but I eventually got caught up in school, began doing theatre again and, most importantly, regained my strength and good health.

I sometimes look back on the whole event and think to myself: What if the two women who performed CPR on me hadn't been there? Had they not been there, I doubt I would be here standing before you today. The building I was in had no AEDs on the wall, and out of probably a hundred people in the building, those two women were the only two who knew CPR. After I was released from the hospital, I learned that only seven percent of people who suffer sudden cardiac arrest survive, and I can see why. My case can be truly considered a miracle and I thank my lucky stars every day to have gotten a second chance. I was saved because two people had proper CPR training, because EMTs got to me so quickly, because they had an AED ready to use with them; not everyone, however is so fortunate. This is why we must continue to support the American Heart Association in their goals and ideals. We must strive to have AEDs in all public places, and make sure people know how to use them. We must strive to have as many people as possible certified in CPR. We must strive to have all of our EMTs as well trained and well equipped as the team that saved my life. If even one more life per year is saved, even if the survival rate goes up to eight percent, then it is all worth it.

I am sure that the majority of you here have been affected by heart disease in one way or another. Maybe it was a grandparent, a parent, a sibling, an uncle, a friend. In order to help diminish the number of deaths due to heart disease, the American Heart Association needs your help. The Heart Walk is a means to an end. Register to support this effort either by participating in the walk itself, or by contributing to one of the three teams established here. I am a bit

prejudiced as to which of the teams I would like you to throw your support, but contributing to the walk is what is most important. Thank you for taking time out of your schedule today and listening to my story. Hopefully it will move you enough to try to help eliminate the number one killer in America, heart disease.