

Villager Saved by Fellow Pickleball Players

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THE VILLAGES

On Sept. 19, Al Himmelright began playing pickleball with other players at Rohan Recreation Center. Roughly half an hour later, the District Public Safety Department received a medical call: Himmelright had gone into cardiac arrest.

While medical personnel raced to respond, his fellow players rolled up their sleeves and got to work. Luckily for him, he was surrounded by people who knew what they were doing.

Roughly 350,000 cardiac arrests each year occur outside a hospital, according to the American Heart Association. Survival can depend on how quickly patients get help from people trained to do CPR or use an automatic external defibrillator — two resources in generous supply in The Villages.

A former paramedic, Himmelright, of the Village of Duval, is a member of The Villages Community Emergency Response Team, which offers free classes to Villagers in CPR.

Still, "I just never dreamt that I would be in this position," Himmelright said.

When he stepped on the pickleball court that morning, he'd already had heart bypass surgery earlier in the year. He took a break from his games, drank some water and then felt his head spin.

About 15 feet away, Billy Dyer, of the Village of Sanibel, noticed Himmelright was slumped over, making strange noises.

"I knew something was the matter," Dyer said. "We couldn't tell if he was having a seizure or a heart attack."

He and his pickleball partner went over to help. They quickly realized Himmelright wasn't breathing.

Valerie Reading, of the Village of Dunedin, was playing with Jean Burr, of the Village of Pennecamp, when she heard someone say to call 911.

She grabbed her phone and dialed the number before running over to Himmelright, who was being lowered to the ground by Dyer and his partner.

Word reached Public Safety about 10:30 a.m., according to Fire Chief Edmund Cain. Paramedics arrived six minutes and seven seconds later.



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Al Himmelright, of the Village of Duval, is pictured with Leila DeMayo, of the Village of Dunedin; Valerie Reading, of the Village of Dunedin; and Jean Burr, of the Village of Pennecamp. All three women helped save Himmelright's life when he suffered a cardiac arrest while playing pickleball Sept. 19 at Rohan Recreation Center.

In the meantime, Himmelright's fellow players knew that doing nothing wasn't an option.

To avoid brain damage, blood needs to flow around the body, especially to the brain, said Liza Walters, public information officer for CERT.

"Every minute that the brain does not get blood it's a 10 percent less chance of survival," the Village of Duval resident said. "So if you don't do anything

for six minutes — by which point, hopefully, the EMTs are there — that's 60 percent chance less of survival."

Himmelright had several advantages in his favor.

In April, Reading had become CPR/AED-certified in order to teach yoga. Her fellow player, Burr, was a former EMT.

Together with Lisa Duncan, a former health teacher; Terry Roby, a nurse; and Leila DeMayo, who once had trained to teach others CPR; Burr began chest compressions. Getting compressions to the appropriate depth can be exhausting, so the women took turns to make sure no one grew too weak.

"I felt like I had nurses around me," said Roby, of the Village of Hillsborough. "I felt so confident."

DeMayo began singing "Staying Alive," a song that Duncan, of the Village of Dunedin, once used to teach her students the proper cadence for compressions.

Meanwhile, Jan Witt, of the Village of Sanibel, raced to get an AED from the recreation center. Every center in The Villages has an AED, and there are more than 400 in neighborhoods throughout the community, according to Public Safety's Lt. John Longacre.

Logging onto webapp.pulse-point.org and asking to "Show AEDs" for the area reveals a landscape dotted with hearts containing thunderbolts, the AED symbol. They've also saved lives: Public Safety has logged eight saves in as many years by

The Villages AED groups.

Witt passed off the precious machine, which ultimately ended up in Reading's hands, before forming and joining prayer circles.

"We're just like a big family that tries to watch each other's back and take care of each other, and that was really evidenced that day," Witt said.

As Witt prayed, Reading got the AED working. The machine gave step-by-step instructions on what to do and, eventually, how to stimulate the heart.

It felt like she was in a fog, in

slow motion, DeMayo said.

"You weren't really aware of all the people around you," the Village of Dunedin resident said. "You could hear them every now and then, but it's like you were in a dream. I think something takes over, I really do."

Medical personnel arrived and placed Himmelright in an ambulance, where he awoke. At the hospital, doctors used a heart catheter to open the blocked passage in his artery.

Once he learned what had happened, Himmelright was grateful for his friends and their skills.

Although he wasn't allowed back on the court immediately, Himmelright was able to get back to the sport he loved near the end of October.

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