

A very happy Father's Day: Son saves dad's life with portable defibrillator

WEST PARIS — Wayne Millen worried for years that he'd die of a sudden heart attack.

Genetically, his odds weren't good. His father died of a heart attack at age 66. His mother underwent heart bypass surgery when she was 66. His younger brother, after surviving two heart attacks in two years, died at age 53 of sudden cardiac arrest.

"My brother, Gary, and I were very athletic growing up and we never thought we'd have any problems," said Millen, 60. "I realized, 'There but for the grace of God ... ' you know? That could happen to me."

So Millen regularly went to the doctor. He submitted to all recommended medical tests and took medication that lowered his cholesterol to ideal levels. He worked to stay fit. And last year he bought an automated external defibrillator.

An AED is a portable electronic device that automatically diagnoses a sudden, life-threatening heart problem and shocks the heart back into rhythm. Although they're increasingly common in businesses, schools and public areas, few people have them in their homes.

When Millen bought his for just under \$700, he thought he might be wasting his money — the device would be useless if he went into cardiac arrest while home alone or when he wasn't home, or he might be fine and not go into cardiac arrest at all — but he looked at the AED as a little extra insurance.

Last Sunday, that insurance paid off.

Millen's 27-year-old son, who had just arrived for a weeklong family visit, used the AED to save his father's life.

"It's extraordinary," said Alan Langburd, the cardiologist who treated Millen when he arrived at Central Maine Medical Center in Lewiston. "And it's (almost) Father's Day."

Family history

Millen grew concerned about his future when his younger brother died in 2006. Gary Millen had just returned from jogging and was in his bedroom, preparing to take a shower, when he collapsed. His wife heard him fall, but by the time she reached him, it was too late.

Wayne Millen was a couple of years older than his brother. A fatal heart attack could come at any time and, if his brother's death was any indication, it could come all of a sudden.

He did everything he could to keep his heart healthy, including seeing his doctor every six months and taking medication to lower his cholesterol. Regular tests showed he was healthy, though he did have markers for the kind of plaque that builds in the arteries of the heart. His arteries weren't blocked, though, and if the plaque was stable he would probably be fine. If it wasn't stable, if a little piece broke off and caused a clot, he could go into cardiac arrest.

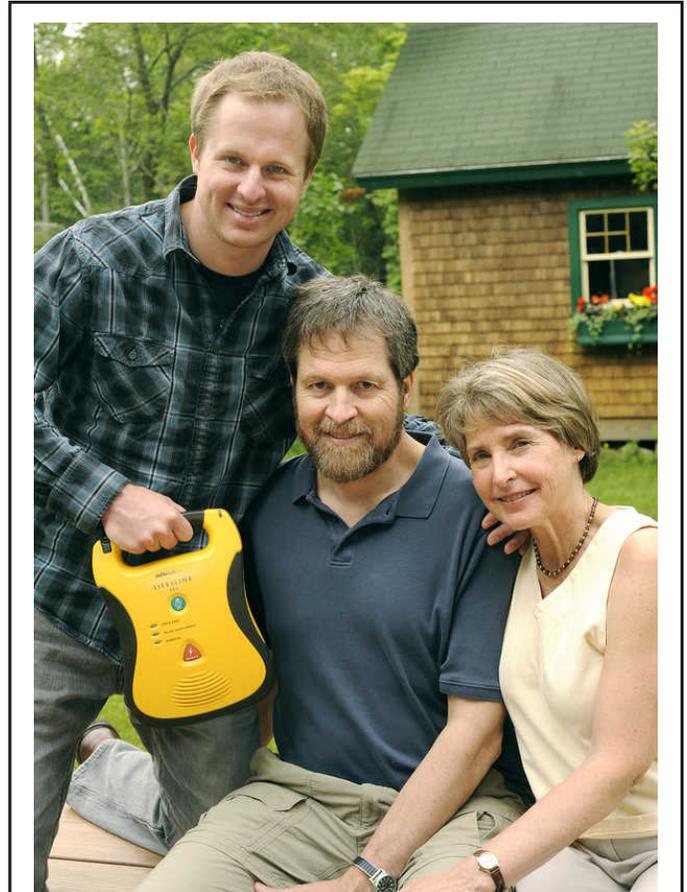
There was no way to tell.

And Millen never was a fan of uncertainty.

"Wayne is one of the most proactive people I've ever met in my life," said his wife, Karen Johnson. "If he needs to learn about something, he learns about it better than anybody I've ever met. He's a researcher. He's on the computer; he delves into it. He doesn't waste any time in becoming an expert in whatever he wants to know."

What he wanted to know was how to save his life.

A few years after his brother's death, an article in a local newspaper gave him an idea. The story talked about a public safety group that was providing AEDs to tri-county businesses, schools and public gathering spots. The more Millen learned about AEDs, the more he thought it would be a good idea for him to have one.



Jesse Millen-Johnson, left, holds the defibrillator he used to save the life of his father, Wayne Millen, center, who went into sudden cardiac arrest at his home. Millen's wife, Karen Johnson, right, a registered nurse, assisted in the life-saving effort.

Millen's research told him that most people who have heart attacks don't go into sudden cardiac arrest and don't need defibrillators to shock their hearts back into rhythm, but his brother's death said it was a possibility. His research showed that most heart attacks happen while the victim is at home and that quick medical attention can mean the difference between life and death, but his house was in a deeply rural section of West Paris and there was no way an ambulance could get there quickly.

His conclusion: He needed an AED in his home.

Laurieann Milligan, who develops public access to AEDs for Med-Care Ambulance in Mexico, helped Millen get one. Although she'd given out more than 100 AEDs, she'd never had someone ask for one for a home.

"I said, 'That's absolutely an amazing idea,'" she said.

Although AEDs can cost up to \$2,500, Milligan got one for Millen at the state's rate — just under \$700.

"You pay twice that or whatever for insurance you may never use," Millen said. "I thought, 'Hey, I may never need it, but there's a chance.'"

Thinking other people might also be helped by it, Millen and his wife told neighbors they had the AED if anyone in the neighborhood ever needed it. They

stashed the device in their upstairs bathroom.

It stayed untouched for a year and a half.

Sudden cardiac arrest

Last Sunday, Millen played a few quick games of basketball with his son, Jesse Millen-Johnson, who had just arrived from Utah for a weeklong vacation, and his son's old college friends. They played for about a half-hour. Millen and his teammate won two out of three.

A forester for the U.S. Forest Service, Millen had said the week before how good he felt, how he was bounding up the steps at the forestry office. But after the basketball game, he felt tired and a little winded. That was easily explained: He hadn't played basketball in years and he was playing now with guys half his age.

"Boy, I don't have the energy that I used to have," he told his wife when he went inside. "I probably shouldn't be doing that."

Millen grabbed a couple of baby aspirin. His neck and shoulders hurt, but he'd gotten hit in the neck during the game and he was pretty sure the pain was from that, not a heart attack. Still, the aspirin couldn't hurt. More insurance, he thought.

He went upstairs to take a shower. He and his wife were going out.

A few minutes later, Johnson heard a thump.

She thought the computer chair in their second bedroom had fallen over. It had happened before.

"Wayne, are you OK?" she called from the other room. "Did the chair fall over?"

The only answer was the sound of labored breathing. She started running.

"I knew immediately," she said.

Millen's collapse almost exactly mirrored his younger brother's.

A nurse at St. Mary's Regional Medical Center in Lewiston, Johnson knew what to do in an emergency, but everything seemed to go wrong. She had trouble laying him flat for CPR because he was too heavy for her to move. She couldn't get the phone to work — the family believes Millen accidentally pulled the cord out of the wall when he fell — which meant no dialing 911.

She went to the window and yelled to her son and his friends, "Emergency!"

In the seconds it took Millen-Johnson to race upstairs, his father stopped breathing. He had no pulse.

"I was like, 'Is this the way it's going to end?'" Millen-Johnson said. "We knew this was a possibility, but at the same time you never, ever think it would ever happen to someone you care about."

Millen-Johnson couldn't get reception on the cell phone he'd brought from Utah, so one of his friends called 911 on his phone. Johnson started chest compressions. She told her son to get the AED.

With shaking hands, he tore open the bag and placed the pads according to the directions. Although Millen and his wife had just gone over the AED instructions the week before — they'd happened to dust the device as they dusted the rest of the house preparing for company and Johnson took the opportunity to learn more about it — their son hadn't encountered one since a wilderness leadership course in high school. But the directions were simple and the device spoke commands.

The AED told everyone to clear. The shock to Millen's heart sent his body 6 inches off the ground, but it worked. He started breathing a little. The machine advised CPR while it analyzed Millen's heart. Millen-Johnson took over the chest compressions. His mother had done them for a few minutes, but 61 years old and dealing with arthritis, she couldn't keep it up.

"I would have done everything I could," she said. "But Jesse's strength was certainly good."

A couple of minutes later, Millen stopped breathing again. The AED again told everyone to clear.

The second shock, like the first, got him breathing again.

The AED advised them to continue chest compressions. Millen-Johnson did for the next 10 minutes, fearing the heart under his hands could stop a third time and that any second his father could die again.

Millen had been right that no ambulance could get to his rural home quickly. It took paramedics about 15 minutes to reach Millen, long past the point he could have been revived if his family hadn't used the AED.

He was on his way to the hospital, alive.

'Every day now is a gift'

Most people who have heart attacks first notice one of several symptoms, including pain or heaviness in their chests. Millen was one of the five to 10 percent who went straight into cardiac arrest.

"His presenting symptom was sudden death," said Langburd, the cardiologist.

By the time he reached CMMC, Millen's heart was back to a normal rhythm. At the hospital, Langburd put in a stent to open the artery and keep it open.

If Millen's son hadn't used the AED, Langburd said, "(Millen) probably would have died. And if he had survived, he probably would have had pretty significant neurologic impairment. Often, they just don't wake up. Or if they do wake up, they're mentally challenged."

Millen had none of those problems.

Langburd has been practicing medicine for 27 years. He had never encountered someone who was saved with an AED at home.

"Jesse was a hero," Langburd said. "(Millen) was alive and doing well by the time we got him. So he's a hero. Truly a hero. He deserves accolades."

Millen remembers nothing after going to his bedroom to get ready to take a shower. He woke up in the ICU. Doctors and nurses told him it was a miracle he was alive.

Medicated and disoriented, Millen was little confused at first, but at least one thing got through: When his family told him they'd used the AED, he smiled.

"So," he said, "it worked."

Millen spent a few days in the hospital. On Friday he was still sore from his son's chest compressions, but he was able to move around the house. His wife and son stayed nearby. The trauma was still fresh.

"It's pretty overwhelming," Millen said. "I see them sometimes looking at me when I'm probably thinking the same thing: They came that close to going through a funeral this week."

Instead, Millen-Johnson took an extra week off from work and will spend it with his parents.

"Every day now is a gift," Millen-Johnson said.

They celebrated Millen-Johnson's 28th birthday Saturday. And on Sunday, a holiday.

"It'll be a very happy Father's Day," Millen said.

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Wayne Millen and his family believe others should consider getting an AED if they have a family history of sudden cardiac arrest or are otherwise at risk for it. Laurieann Milligan, who develops public access to AEDs for Med-Care Ambulance in Mexico, helped Millen get his. She agrees with the Millens.

People should understand their risk factors for sudden cardiac arrest and should ask their doctors to regularly do EKGs to assess that risk, she said. Milligan is willing to help get an AED for anyone who wants one for the home, at the state price of \$698. She said people can also call their local hospitals or Emergency Management Service departments for assistance.

Milligan can be reached at 364-8748.

AEDs are expensive, but she believes they're worth the cost.

"As much as we're going out and buying an Xbox, we should be going out and buying a defibrillator," she said.