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ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

AFTER PARAMEDICS SAVE HIS LIFE, MAN GIVES BACK

By Rita Frankenberg

The Virginian-Pilot

Tony Pirrone had just crossed the finish line at the OBX Marathon in November 2007 when he suddenly realized he didn't feel so great.

Pirrone, then 49, was in the medical tent after the race when he went into cardiac arrest.

"I just said, 'Uh-oh,' and then I just kind of faded into the darkness," said Pirrone, who has competed in eight marathons and numerous half-marathons. After losing consciousness, Pirrone had vivid memories of seeing a man being worked on by paramedics.

"I was in the air high up," the Great Neck resident said. "I could see this guy getting worked on, but I couldn't see the face, just his legs and running shoes. And I was rooting this guy on."

He recalls seeing doctors and nurses trying to revive the man with defibrillation paddles. He said he remembers them zapping him several times with no response.

"And then it was like somebody grabbed me out of the sky and threw me back into my body," Pirrone said.

The experience changed him. During the past two years, he has dedicated his life to saving others.

It was the second heart attack Pirrone suffered – he had his first when he was only 43.

After being stabilized, he was flown to Sentara Virginia Beach General. There he received three stents to help keep his heart's arteries open. He now has a total of five.

He studied to become an emergency medical technician and is now a member of the Virginia Beach Volunteer Rescue Squad.

He's been responding to medical emergencies for a little more than a year now and was awarded Rookie of the Year by the Virginia Beach Volunteer Rescue Squad.

Pirrone, now 51, said he and his volunteer rescue squad partner have responded to six cardiac arrest calls. And of those six, they have been able to save five people. The typical conversion rate in those situations, Pirrone said, is usually 1 in 20.

"We've been very lucky," he added. "I don't like anyone dying on my watch."

Saving people is important to Pirrone. Because of the doctors and paramedics volunteering their time at the race that November day a few years ago, he said, he got a second chance at life.

"If it hadn't been for them being at the finish line, I wouldn't have been able to celebrate my 50th birthday," Pirrone said. "I wouldn't have been there for my 25th wedding anniversary last September, and I wouldn't have been there to see my kids grow up."

In addition to becoming a volunteer EMT, Pirrone is also getting certified to teach the Volunteer Rescue Squad's free monthly CPR classes. When he teaches the classes, he said, he always starts the four-hour class by telling students that anyone can help save a life.

"If you've got the skill, you are buying them time until we get there," Pirrone said. "And that's precious."

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Tony Pirrone's EMT work earned Rookie of the Year honors from his peers.



BOBBY HILL

Great Neck resident Tony Pirrone is running again after a near-death experience in 2007.
