

# Survivor Spreads the Word on AEDs

BY JERRY LAWS



**B**eing saved with an AED is a life-changing experience. No surprise, the survivors typically become the devices' most fervent evangelists.

Gerald Elliott, who retired as a detective in May 2010 with the Durham Police Department, was saved with an AED in the early evening of Aug. 15, 2009, as he directed gametime traffic outside the Durham Bulls' downtown stadium.

Elliott, 43 years old and off duty at the time, was very fortunate. "All of a sudden, everything just went bright white, like somebody turned a spotlight on right in my face. That's the last thing I can remember. At that point, I fell just like a tree being cut down."

A Bulls worker who saw Elliott falling dived and cradled his head before it struck the pavement. When Elliott hit the ground, the impact knocked his gun from his holster and his police radio popped off his belt. The worker grabbed them and then turned Elliott over.

"He noticed that I already had turned blue," Elliott recalled. "My skin had turned bluish-gray and my eyes were wide open, fixed. He said my lips had turned dark blue, and that scared him to death. He grabbed my police radio and got on it, said 'I need help.'"

EMTs on duty at the park initially went to another part of the stadium in response to the call, but soon they reached Elliott's side and used an AED to revive him. He said he's been told that about six minutes elapsed between his collapse and the AED shocks that restored his heart's rhythm.

Three weeks earlier, he had undergone his third back surgery. When he was hooked up to a heart monitor that day, an anesthesiologist advised him he had a slight heart murmur and suggested he have it checked by a physician. He can laugh about it now. "Well, I had it checked out," he said.

Elliott said he has had no health issues since the August 2009 incident.

## Story Inspires Other Officers

Officers in the Durham PD receive in-service training annually on cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and their training has included AED operation for the past three years, said Elliott. "The instructor told us these are idiot-proof, you just listen to the instructions and look at the pictures and follow what they say," he said. "Good thing, too."

Almost one year to the day after his own event, El-

liott himself used an AED to help someone who had collapsed at another Bulls baseball game. "We started CPR on the guy, and we yelled for the EMT to bring the defibrillator down. And we got that guy's heart started. Unfortunately, he didn't make it, but he had had several open heart surgeries and had a pacemaker installed."

Malls throughout the Durham area have installed AEDs, and both security personnel and store employees in the malls have been trained, he said. He now checks routinely when he's visiting a building to see whether AEDs are present on site. "There are a lot more places that need them, I know that for sure," he said.

Because of his event, the department required Elliott to retire in May 2010. But his story has been recounted many times to the department's officers — it has about 500 sworn officers — and has turned them into believers, he said.

Sgt. Dale Gunter of the Durham PD said the department currently has 16 AEDs in service — two in each supervisor's car and two in the department's training division. The funding for them, roughly \$25,000, came from asset forfeiture. "There's a little poetic justice in there — blood money that was used to kill people originally is now used to save people," Gunter said.

"Eventually, we would love to put one in every vehicle," he added, saying that would mean placing an AED in each of about 60 patrol cars. "Doing that would increase our response to cardiac arrest or any emergency call exponentially," Gunter said.

It's a question of money during an era of tight budgets. "If you can save one life," said Gunter, "the thing has paid for itself."

## Planning for the Future

Elliott, now 45, retired after 23 years of service. He said he had worked previously for the Durham County Sheriff's Office and hopes to rejoin it. He also hopes to see automated external defibrillators much more widely deployed.

"I've told my wife that if I ever won the lottery, honest to goodness, one of the things I'd do if I ever won a bunch of money was to make sure these things were everywhere — in schools, churches, all over the place," he said. "I think that would be an awesome project to undertake." **OHS**

*Jerry Laws is editor of Occupational Health & Safety.*