

Saving Lives in Pemberton

November 20, 2015 was a special day in Pemberton, but few knew about it. There were no banners, no podiums, no parades. Three people had heart attacks, and all three were brought back to life.

Less than 10 percent of Americans survive a heart attack, or cardiac arrest. But the skilled, swift work of Virtua's advanced and basic life support teams meant three people beat the odds.

"I can't think of a time when one crew had multiple cardiac arrests in one day, and all of them had very good outcomes – and I've been doing this since 1986," says Scott Kasper, Virtua assistant vice president for emergency services.



An Alternative Support Apparatus (ASAP) is an all-terrain vehicle that enables paramedics to reach patients in any terrain.

"It's extraordinary. All three patients were revived by the time they got to the hospital," he says.

Virtua has long provided advanced life support, or ALS, across Burlington and Camden Counties. ALS is performed by paramedics with more than 2,000 hours of training.

But last November, Virtua also began providing basic life support, or BLS, in Pemberton. While BLS is performed by Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), paramedics and EMTs often work together to save lives.

And when a 911 call comes in, none of the medics knows what's next. Chest pain. Seizures. Difficulty breathing. Burns. Blood sugar that's too high, or too low. Car accidents. Even shootings or stabbings.

"Nobody calls 911 when they're having a good day," says Mike Williams, a Virtua paramedic with 27 years of experience.

Virtua's award-winning emergency medical services are known throughout New Jersey for top-of-the-line education and equipment. From the health system's school of paramedic science to its real-life simulation labs, the level of training sets Virtua apart.

In fact, among the five statewide awards Virtua earned in 2015 were outstanding EMS educator of the year and first place in the ALS division of simulation games.

Overall Virtua was named outstanding private EMS agency of the year.

Rebecca "Becky" Scott, of Tabernacle, was posthumously named the 2015 outstanding paramedic after working at the highest levels through



her last shift, 12 days before her death last October from breast cancer.

"Really, though, at the end of the day, the things that make our tools and technology work are our people," says Chris Sharpe, EMS education coordinator for Virtua.

"We have children in the schools, maybe our parents and grandparents live here, and we fully understand that when a medical emergency arises, it will be our coworkers who respond," says Williams.

Paramedic Jim O'Connor recounts a 911 call in which a man in his 40s was complaining of chest pain. On the way to the hospital, the man's heart stopped.

"A few weeks later I got a card in the mail from this gentleman and it said, 'Thank you for saving my life,'" says O'Connor. "This man was dead while he was in the back of that ambulance with us, and we were able to save his life. He walked out of the hospital."

In 2016, Virtua's Emergency Medical Service was honored with the American Heart Association's Lifelines EMS Silver Achievement Award.