NEW ZEALAND
Resuscitation Council
WHAKAHAUORA AOTEAROA

“I felt quite fortunate to have done my full first aid course, if I hadn’t, I would’ve been even more panicked.”

February 2023 23 year old Atelea (Te Arawa, Ngāti Whakaaue) was working as part of the response for Cyclone Gabrielle in Hawkes Bay in his role in the Defence Force.

“I got to work that day and we were deployed to drive fuel tankers to an aerodrome in Waipukurau. This was to support helicopters to scope damage from the cyclone”.

“The original plan was to stay in Waipukurau, but evacuees needed to be accommodated. The only accommodation available was a small couch at the aerodrome. A colleague of mine made the decision for us to return home for the night instead, a decision that, which I later realised, played a huge part in my survival story.”

Atelea is based at Ohakea and lives in Bulls with his partner Tianii.

“I got home between 11:30 and midnight. I didn’t want to wake Tianii, so I decided to get into the spare bed. Tianii heard me and came and got into the spare bed with me. Luckily, because that night I went into cardiac arrest in my sleep.”

Tianii had in the week before completed first-aid training for her work. “Tianii’s response to everything attributed to my survival”.

Tianii remembers it taking a while for her early morning brain to work out what was happening in bed next to her.

“It was really early in the morning at around 6:20 am on Feb 15, I remembered because I woke up to Ate moving around in bed just before my 6:30 alarm went off. I thought he was having a bad dream which was causing all the moving so I tried to wake him up.”

“I sat up properly and really tried my hardest to wake him, but still nothing. He eventually rolled over and ended up laying on top of me, that’s when I noticed he wasn’t breathing.”

“I kept shaking him and calling out to him and just hoping for something and even did mouth-to-mouth to blow air into his lungs because then I thought maybe that he would wake up but he didn’t. I knew something was wrong”

“Being the shyest person ever and hating making phone calls, I just knew I had to call 111 because I didn’t want anything to happen to Ate.”

“The people on the phone were so helpful to my partner, they talked her through everything and kept her calm. They instructed her to start CPR. She got me onto the floor and started

quite quickly."

"I was able to provide the information as calmly and clearly as I could. They instructed me to get Ate onto the floor and start CPR, which wasn't the easiest as he is heavy. I was able to eventually get him where I needed him to do CPR."

As part of her work, Tianii is required to do CPR training regularly, she had completed training a week before, and was fresh in her memory.

"I felt quite fortunate to have done my full first aid course before this had happened because if I hadn't, I would've been even more panicked."

"I had been doing CPR non-stop for about 5 minutes, the person on the phone was counting while I pumped his heart."

"One thing they didn't include was me blowing more air into his lungs but I did anyway because naturally, I didn't want him to go without any air"

"There wasn't a single second where I would let Ate lay lifeless, I would always be doing something and making sure I could see signs of something happening from him"

Tianii was worried because they were in a small town and emergency services may take a while to get to them. Fire and Emergency and St John Ambulance responded quickly.

"When the ambulance came I just watched what they were doing to him, I was encouraged not to because they explained that it could affect me or maybe I could've been too weak to see it all happen but I wanted to watch. I wanted to see what they were doing to him and ask why, and I was very grateful for the amount of support I had in those moments"

"I called Ate's mum and explained to her what was happening while just quietly crying and I had my neighbours from across the street who we're good friends with come and stand with

me, as well as a lovely fireman and duty medic who had been there as well."

"I don't have family living in 'Palmy', so I felt really supported when so many people had shown up straight away."

"The paramedics had let me know that Ate's heart stopped and he had no pulse during that time and they were able to shock him 6-7 times which had restarted his heart."

"From the time Tianii called 111 to when my pulse came back, it was 45 minutes".

Atelea was taken to hospital and placed in a medically induced coma for a day. He was surrounded by his whanau and partner.

"The doctors told my parents and Tianii that when I came out of the coma to prepare themselves, my heart wasn't working properly for over 30 minutes, so there was a chance that I wouldn't be the same."

"Despite the doctors telling us he could potentially have brain damage from lack of oxygen, I felt deep down that he was going to be perfectly okay, because there wasn't a single second where I would let him lay lifeless, I was always making sure he was doing something."

When he became conscious Atelea had some short-term memory loss, but his brain was functioning normally.

"Doctors were surprised when I woke up. I didn't talk initially, but I was smiling".

"Recovery was strange, I don't remember anything from the week after it happened, I kept thinking people were making stuff up and trying to trick me when they told me about things that had recently happened".

Atelea was found to have the heart condition, Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome which is when an extra electrical pathway in the heart causes a rapid heartbeat. Atelea now has an ICD (Implantable cardioverter-defibrillator) to help prevent a cardiac arrest if one occurs in

the future.

“The doctors asked me if I’d been having heart palpitations and I didn’t think I was, but when they described them and I then realised that I might have been, but I didn’t know I was.”

Through his work, Atelea “ticked all the boxes for living a healthy lifestyle” he is fit, 23 years old but this didn’t prevent him from having heart problems.

Since his cardiac arrest, Atelea recognises that there were potentially some warning signs. “I always felt super fit but had to work super hard to get the same results as other people my age.”

Atelea has a family history of some heart problems however, Wolff-Parkinson-White can be difficult to diagnose.

“My Dad has a heart condition, but it is different from what I have. I had gone for ECGs in the past due to a fast heart rate during blood pressure tests. I remember them always having problems with my ECGs. But they didn’t notice anything to diagnose at the time”.

Atelea is from a big family with 5 brothers and 1 sister who have had testing since he had his cardiac arrest. “Checking up on everyone is the most important thing we could do.”

When asked what he wanted people to take away from his experience, he said “It was hard to give a simple answer to”.

“Dad was really proactive after my event in making sure my brothers got checked out. If you notice things in your friends encourage them to get checked out too.”

Tianii reflected that this has been a challenging experience “This has definitely been a journey and I wouldn’t wish this upon anyone to have to go through! The paramedics, doctors, and nurses who helped him were the absolute best and I couldn’t have thanked them enough for keeping him here with us!”

“Thinking about my situation, I would like to raise awareness. Even though I knew my Dad had a heart condition, it never really worried me that something similar could happen to me. But you need to look within your own family and use the signs as an opportunity to pick up heart conditions early. You need to look out for each other”.

Read more World Restart a Heart Day Stories:

“Our coach told the boys, ‘I don’t care what you do, kick those doors down”.

"When the rubber hits the road you want to have the muscle memory of knowing how to do CPR."

World Restart a Heart Day