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



On the morning of 18th of August 2014 Cliff woke up, turned off his alarm, and went into cardiac arrest.

Cliff (Ngāti Ruanui, Ngā Rauru, Ngāti Wehiwehi, Ngāti Raukawa) and his partner Alecia (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Maniapoto) are sharing their experience 9 years on to raise awareness that cardiac arrest can affect anyone at any time, and at any age.

Cliff was only 39 at the time of his cardiac arrest and did not have any prior warning signs or symptoms.

Alecia remembers the event and her response vividly. She remembers being woken up by Cliff shaking in bed beside her. “I thought he was choking on the mouthguard he uses for snoring”.

Alecia got up turned on the light and saw that Cliff was stiff and on his side. She managed to check his mouth and remove the mouthguard. Alecia noticed Cliff wasn’t breathing normally “he was breathing in but not breathing out. I leapt over Cliff to grab my phone and called 111.”

“The operator was incredible, they told me that it was likely that Cliff was in Cardiac Arrest and that I needed to start CPR”

Alecia followed the 111 operator’s instructions and moved Cliff onto the floor to begin CPR.

“Cliff is 130 kgs so I don’t know how I did it, but I was told to get him on the floor so I did.”

Alecia remembers that she felt like she needed to make sure their house was obvious and ready for emergency services arrival.

“I jumped up and opened the curtains, put our dogs in the backyard, and opened the door ready for emergency services to arrive. Then I jumped back on Cliff’s chest and began CPR”

Emergency services arrived fast, Alecia and Cliff’s home is close to their local Fire Station, and within minutes Fire and Emergency NZ staff had arrived and took over CPR.

“One of the staff walked me into the lounge and sat me down. They told me that there would be people arriving to take over looking after Cliff”

“I remember looking at Cliff’s laptop bag and diary and wondering if I needed to call his work

and tell them that he was dead".

Emergency services administered CPR and shocks from an AED (automated external defibrillator). Because of Alecia's quick action and a co-response between Wellington Free Ambulance and Fire and Emergency NZ, Cliff's heart was restarted and he was stable enough and taken to hospital.

Cliff was in an induced coma for 24 hours, around 8 or 9 hours he was showing signs of wanting to wake up. Alecia remembers being scared Cliff wouldn't remember who she was.

Initially, Cliff had short-term memory loss which can be expected with cardiac arrest patients and he repeated a lot of the same questions which Alecia had to prepare visitors for when they went to see Cliff.

"We had friends over from Aussie visiting me in the hospital over a few days and every time I saw them I said 'Hey bro! What are you doing here?'"

An ICD (Internal Cardiac Defibrillator) was fitted to Cliff's heart, after 4 days in hospital they returned home.

"After a month it felt like it didn't happen."

Cliff admits he went back to work way too early "The trauma of it all hit me a couple of months later. I was mentally exhausted".

There was no cause found for Cliff's cardiac arrest and the impact of his event was felt by his wider whanau as there were no signs or symptoms leading up to Cliff's arrest.

"Cliff's daughter was really worried that she could have a cardiac arrest too".

Not long after his own life-threatening event, Cliff ran into a friend who had also had a cardiac arrest around the same time.

Reflecting on their experience Alecia commented on why she thinks people don't prioritise learning CPR.

"It could be the ignorance of the way people think - that it won't happen to them."

Alecia said that one of the challenges of his cardiac arrest was that it was so unexpected. Cliff is young and healthy “I didn’t think this would happen to us, I thought cardiac arrests only happen to old people”

“Knowledge is power. If it takes a day out of your life to learn CPR – then why wouldn’t you? When the rubber hits the road you want to have the muscle memory of knowing how to do CPR. It’s so important”.

Read more World Restart a Heart Day Stories:

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

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

[World Restart a Heart Day]