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the fight of their lives

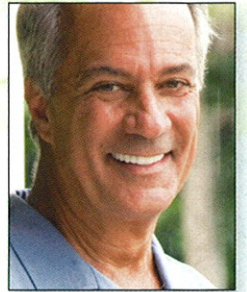
Meet four remarkable people whose courage in the face of devastating medical challenges reminds all of us to live each day as if it were our last.



MaryAnne Susin



Debbie Wasserman Schultz



Richard Frisina

By **KEVIN KAMINSKI**
and **KELLY WOLFE**

RESCUE 911

Doctors aren't the only ones who work on the front lines of health care. Meet three locals with stories to prove it.

[richard frisina]

Richard Frisina is a tall, trim, athletic man with a wide, friendly smile and a tan just this side of walnut brown. He's 61, but he keeps the schedule of an overachieving camp counselor. In a typical week, the resident of St. Andrews in Boca Raton works out four times, plays tennis and hits the links.

So, when he woke up feeling "blah" last spring, Frisina decided to check it out.

"I had shortness of breath and lower back pain," says Frisina, who retired at 49 after a career in real estate. "It was normally something I'd fight through. But it lasted a while, so I decided to see my internist."

Frisina's regular doctor was out of town, so Richard Levine, also an internist, stepped in. He quickly diagnosed Frisina with an aortic dissection—an often-fatal tear in the body's primary blood vessel. The same condition killed actor John Ritter.

"I put the stethoscope on his back, and I heard it resonating through his chest like a drum," Levine says.

Upsetting Frisina could have been the difference between life and death. So, Levine casually strolled out of the examining room and called 911. By the time he returned, there were sirens wailing in the distance.

"Hear that music downstairs?" Levine asked Frisina. "They're playing our song."

Frisina was rushed to the Lynn Heart Institute at Boca Raton Community Hospital last April 21. Later, he would learn his aorta was torn from the valve in his heart—all the way down to below his groin. "It happened so fast," he says. "It was almost like a dream."

What happened next was equally surreal. Before Dr. James Morris, medical director of the Lynn Heart Institute, could repair the tear, Frisina's body had to be placed in a state of deep hypothermia. His body was cooled to 55 degrees, his head was packed in ice—and the blood was drained from his body.

"He wasn't dead," Morris says. "We just suspended things for a while. There's a window of time that you can do that and restore circulation with the expectation that everything will be fine."

For Frisina, that window of suspended circulation was 27 minutes. While Frisina's body was in "suspended animation," Morris began stitching the aorta back together, a procedure that took approximately 90 minutes.

Now, Frisina sports an almost invisible, 2-inch scar in the middle of his chest. He opens his shirt and displays it like a badge.

"Of the people who have this illness, one out of 10 make it to the hospital," he says. "Of the ones that make it to the hospital, one out of 10 survive. You do the math." Frisina flashes that smile again.

"I was one good sneeze away from the big sleep."

RICKY GRAU

CAPTAIN, PALM BEACH COUNTY FIRE RESCUE

Ricky Grau was watching his son play baseball in West Boca when a young softball player collapsed on a neighboring field. Grau, off duty, ran to the girl's side.

"She was laying in right field, surrounded by about 20 people," says Grau, an 18-year veteran with Palm Beach County Fire Rescue. "I knew as soon as I saw her that she was in cardiac arrest."

The Boca resident began CPR on Claire Dunlap, age 15, and then shocked her three times with a defibrillator carried by the athletic trainer on her team.

"She began to breathe on her own," Grau says. "She was dead until we shocked her."

Dunlap was later diagnosed with arrhythmogenic right ventricular dysplasia, a heart condition she has had since birth.

She has since made a full recovery and keeps in close touch with Grau. "It's nothing but a miracle, it really is," he says.

GERRY PAGANO

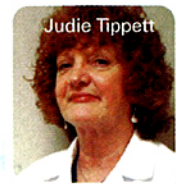
DIRECTOR OF AEROMEDICAL FACILITIES, HEALTH CARE DISTRICT OF P.B. COUNTY

Palm Beach County has two Trauma Hawk helicopters, which transport roughly 3,000 critically ill or injured patients to area hospitals each year. Gerry Pagano is the man in charge of those helicopters.

"It's hard to describe the feeling you get when you are you involved with saving someone's life," Pagano says.



Ricky Grau



Judie Tippett

He should know. Pagano, who has worked with the Trauma Hawk unit since 1990, has seen more than his share of near-death scenarios. One in particular stands out.

Logan Tinfina of Wellington, only 7 at the time, was playing outside with his buddies when he was struck by a car. The impact fractured his skull and tore his liver. A Trauma Hawk helicopter rushed Logan to Delray Medical Center. After 18 months of intensive therapy, Logan is back in school and playing with his friends.

Pagano says the flight made all the difference. The helicopter reached the hospital in five minutes. An ambulance would have taken 30 minutes or more.

"[Those] minutes," Pagano says, "are critical."

JUDIE TIPPETT

RN AND DIRECTOR OF EMERGENCY SERVICES, BOCA RATON COMMUNITY HOSPITAL

After three decades in emergency medicine, Judie Tippett has the knowledge, the training and all the best medications at her disposal.

But her most prized possession?

Gut instinct.

"Nurses in the ER department have an intuition that is unique to them," says Tippett, a nurse for nearly 30 years. "You pick up little things—a word here or a word there. That's just not taught."

She remembers the entire family that came in complaining of nausea. They thought it was a bug or the flu. But their cherry-red lips told another tale: carbon monoxide poisoning.

And when intuition is combined with the right medication? Well, that may just be a miracle.

"A patient came in with full-blown right side weakness and unable to speak," Tippett says.

The man was having a stroke. Doctors gave him a dose of tPA—a clot-busting drug—and within 30 minutes, he was back to normal.