

EVERYDAY HEROES

230923H YAGVY93V3

Quick thinking helped save a life in a heartbeat

A young student owes her life to her classmates. Alison Batcheler reports

Kaelee Girra, 20, does not remember much about having a heart attack at university four months ago. But she knows it was the quick action of two classmates that saved her life.

In the middle of presenting a rehearsed dialogue to her Italian class at UWA on June 4, Kaelee's heart stopped.

With no memory of what occurred, or of the days before, she can only report what she has been told happened.

"I was sitting down in the middle of giving an oral presentation in my Italian class and I believe my exam partner noticed I was fainting and fell to the floor, collapsed and passed out," she said.

"Apparently, someone noticed that I was getting very pale throughout the presentation but that was the only hint anything was about to happen — it turned out I had a cardiac arrest."

Classmate Sandra Chambers, 18, an arts/law student and trained swimming instructor, watched the collapse, for a split second thinking it was somehow part of her fellow student's presentation.

"While she was speaking she just bent back, her head flew back and eyes rolled," Sandra recalled, not expecting she would need to use her CPR skills anywhere other than around water.

But when someone called out if anyone knew resuscitation, reality and instinct had kicked in.

"It was petrifying but we just jumped to it, but in the back of my mind was the fear that I might be getting it wrong," she said.

She didn't.

Together with another student, Jessie Clifton, 18, who had learnt her CPR and first-aid skills to manage injuries that might occur while horse riding, the two kept up a routine of cardiac compression and ventilation until emergency help arrived, some time later.

"I believe it took 35 minutes for the ambulance to arrive and find us within the university," Kaelee said.

"Doing CPR for that time, I am told, is quite a long time and it's miraculous that I got through it."

In that time she said university staff had used a defibrillator to shock her heart back into action three to four times, as did the paramedics later.

Her next memory is of struggling to emerge from an induced coma some days later in the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital intensive care unit where doctors were at a loss to explain how the fit, healthy young woman, with no cardiac risk factors or family history of heart problems developed the dangerously rapid and irregular heartbeat — known as ventricular fibrillation — that forced her heart to stop pumping.

Later tests had found no underlying disease or damage to her heart.

She said her cardiologist had



Life saved: Kaelee Girra, centre, and fellow students Sandra Chambers, left, and Jessie Clifton who carried out CPR on Kaelee. Picture: Guy Magowan

of SADS — Sudden Adult Death Syndrome — where apparently fit, healthy adults around her age have a catastrophic cardiac event and die suddenly.

"The cardiologist thinks that may have happened to me but I was lucky enough to be saved at the time," she said.

A small defibrillator unit, that she must now have for life and that has been implanted near her left shoulder, will deliver a measured impulse to arrest the same fatal rhythm should it develop again.

It was not possible to express enough gratitude to those who saved her life, Kaelee said.

"The fact that they jumped up

just began CPR, was just amazing," she said.

"It is such a huge thing to be able to save a life. I'm sure the girls that saved me will carry that with them for the rest of their lives and know that they saved somebody."

"That must be such a fantastic feeling."

"It doesn't only affect the person they have saved but also their family and friends. I know most of my family have personally thanked Jessie and Sandy."

Now having deferred her studies, while recovering some strength lost in her legs, she plans to move to Kalgoorlie and is motivated to work in an occupation where she can help others.

the efforts of medical and nursing, paramedical staff who helped her.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do before the incident but I definitely want to be helping people in some way — I am just not sure yet what form that will take," she said.

"I try to encourage as many people as I can to do CPR because you never know when you are going to need it."

"You could be walking down the street and someone can just collapse in front of you."

Sandra said it was the first time she had used her first-aid and resuscitation skills, acquired as part of her swimming instructor training just six months earlier.

sort of bandaging — not to revive someone young in my Italian class," she said. "Often people say they want to learn CPR and first aid but put it off. This just shows these things can happen at any time."

Jessie, who is studying engineering at university, said she had expected to use her first-aid skills to manage broken bones and injuries after horse riding, or at the beach or on someone older.

"But this instance shows perfectly why taking a weekend out of your life to do a course can make a lifetime of difference," she said. "People need to realise how easy and cheap it is to learn — and that