**Irwin's Story: Crew Responds Quickly to Save Actor's Life**

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Irwin Blumenthal, 75, is a retired electrical engineer. During his career at Rand Corporation, he developed a missile defense system called the "One-Eyed Goalie." Upon his retirement, Irwin, a part-time sailor, was bit by the acting bug.

Today he spends his days acting as an extra (or backgrounder, as people in the business prefer to be called) on various television shows. He and his wife Pat also lead a fund-raising program to acquire housing so adults with Downs Syndrome may live independent lives.

With his full white beard and twinkling eyes, Irwin has landed backgrounder roles as Santa Claus, a rabbi, a scientist and a psychiatrist, among others. On a Monday morning, he was part of a group of backgrounders taping a scene in a senior citizens center for television's "Ally McBeal." The episode being shot would celebrate Valentine's Day 2000.

During the end of his lunch break, he remembers being on the telephone with his wife, Pat. "I was telling her where I was, and the next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital."

Irwin collapsed due to sudden cardiac arrest. Fortunately, people nearby recognized the [signs of cardiac arrest](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/More/CardiacArrest/Cardiac-Arrest_UCM_002081_SubHomePage.jsp) and knew what to do. Shea Farrell, a producer on the show, and security guard John Miller immediately began performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Someone else called the set nurse, Shirley Kuzmunich, who remembered that an automated external defibrillator, or AED, had been left on loan by the device manufacturer's salesperson.

Cardiac arrest occurs suddenly — typically with little or no warning — and is caused by a disturbance in the heart's electrical system. The heart begins to beat chaotically and blood stops being effectively pumped through the body. The only known treatment for cardiac arrest is [defibrillation](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/Arrhythmia/PreventionTreatmentofArrhythmia/Defibrillation_UCM_305002_Article.jsp). American Heart Association research shows that for every minute that defibrillation is delayed, the likelihood of resuscitating the victim decreases by 10 percent.

Farrell, Miller and the others did the right thing to help Irwin. Performing CPR can buy time for the victim by maintaining the vital flow of blood through the body. Kuzmunich checked for vital signs and continued CPR until another crew member arrived with the AED. After two shocks, Irwin's heart rhythm returned to normal. By the time paramedics arrived, he was breathing on his own.

Today, he and his wife Pat realize that a little seven-pound device, which, in some ways, serves as a "heart defense system," enabled them to celebrate future Valentine's Days.

"I was overwhelmed by the capacity of the emergency, and the ability of the crew members and personnel to react as quickly as they did," said Pat, who was told that it was lucky that an AED was even on the set.

A salesman for the device's manufacturer dropped it off a few days earlier for the medical crew to consider purchasing. Since that time, the medical office for the three television shows filmed at that studio, "Ally McBeal," "The Practice" and "Boston Public," have acquired four AEDs.

With his wry sense of humor, Irwin asks, "Do they call them the Blumenthal Four?"