

Fixing Broken Hearts

Entrepreneur on mission to prevent cardiac arrest deaths

By David Garbe
SUN-TIMES NEWS GROUP

02/17/06

“Salesman” is not the best word to describe Vernon LaVia.

“Missionary” might do, or “crusader.” He favors “guerilla marketer.”

His business is managing 400 people in a 26-state sales network for automated external defibrillators, or AEDs. But for LaVia, moving product is not about maximizing profits. His real business is saving lives from sudden cardiac arrest.

It’s a goal he takes personally, ever since watching his father collapse without warning and die minutes later.

That was in 2000, when father and son were on a birdwatching trip to the remote Aleutian island of Attu. Both were in excellent health, and neither knew anything about sudden cardiac arrest.

“After that, I learned all about it,” LaVia said. What he learned was this: Sudden cardiac arrest claims the lives of more than 340,000 people per year in circumstances similar to LaVia’s father — which is to say, completely unpredictably.

Although a doctor and a retired nurse were included in the LaVias’ expedition, the only thing that could have made a difference was if they had been carrying an AED.

The devices are usually able to restart the heart of a sudden cardiac arrest victim, so long as they are administered within a few minutes of the onset.

On the plane ride bearing his father’s body back home, LaVia had vowed to transform his family’s tragedy into a source of hope.

Finding it didn’t take long.

With more than a decade of experience as a sales executive in the health insurance industry and a dozen entrepreneurial start-ups under his belt, LaVia realized he could use his business savvy to spread AEDs through the world, as many as possible and as fast as possible.

By 2003, he had sold off or retired from all of his other enterprises to create Defibrillators USA, a bare-bones company that could sell AEDs with almost no overhead costs.

He found a partner in spirit in the form of Defibtech, Inc., a Connecticut company that was founded in 1999 with the goal of making America’s best and lowest-priced AED.

So far, medical studies and market studies show Defibtech has been successful on both counts.

With a suggested price of less than \$1,500, DefibTech’s primary model has dramatically altered a market where most AEDs were selling for around \$4,000 in 1999. Although average prices have since fallen to the neighborhood of \$2,000, Defibtech retains its



Aurora businessman Vernon LaVia sells automated external defibrillators by the thousands, in memory of his dad, who died in his arms and might have been saved by such a device. The defibrillators restore heartbeats in instances of cardiac arrest.

low-bid status.

At the same time, reports from institutions ranging from the FDA to the University of Illinois confirm that Defibtech’s AEDs are among the easiest to use, fastest, and most durable on the market.

If that sets off ‘too good to be true’ alarm bells, LaVia laughs and says you wouldn’t be the first.

When potential buyers say they never accept the lowest bid, LaVia is quick to note that his company is the official AED supplier for discriminating customers ranging from the state of New Jersey to the 2006 Winter Olympic Games.

It’s possible because both the manufacturer and LaVia’s distribution company are small private companies operating with no shareholders to demand the double-digit margins standard in the medical industry, and operating with no frills.

LaVia, who is married to State Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia, D-Aurora, works from his Aurora home and is the sole manager of a sales staff that is completely decentralized and dispersed across 26 states.

In less than three years, his Defibrillators USA has grown to include 75 sub-distributors with about 400 individual sales representatives.

“I’ve thought about getting an office in downtown Aurora or somewhere,” LaVia said, remembering his days as a vice president at AETNA Insurance and other large corporations.

“(An office) would only be nine grand a year,” he said. “But, hey, that’s nine extra defibrillators that could be out there saving a life.”

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