

HEALTH: *Suicidal mom feels 'blessed' to get another chance after a bottle of pills and the elements nearly took a fatal toll*

'Dead' woman brought back to life

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

The 48-year-old mother of four was lying beside her mini-van on the cold asphalt of a Concord parking lot.

She had been there for hours, the result of her fifth attempt at an overdose. An empty bottle of anti-depressants sat on the seat inside the van.

The woman's family had reported her missing 36 hours before. They told police she had attempted overdoses before, but had always been discovered before it was too late.

By the time paramedics arrived at the parking lot and transported the woman to York Central Hospital at 7:30 a.m. Oct. 13, she was dead.

But because her body was so cold, a team of emergency

room nurses, doctors and a respiratory therapist worked for a full hour in an attempt to bring her back to life.

Miraculously, it worked.

Although the night before had been relatively mild, about 5°C, hypothermia had set in. But when the paramedics arrived, the woman's low moans gave them hope.

"When we arrived on the scene, she wasn't responding to anything verbal and only barely to painful stimuli," recalled paramedic Brock Osborne, just three months on the job when he took the call.

"She wasn't unconscious at that point but we knew right away the person was extremely hypothermic. She was moaning the entire time but as we started driving back, the moaning stopped.



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Internist Dr. John Blakely, left, and Dr. David Wortzman, York Central Hospital chief of emergency, successfully resuscitated a woman who appeared to be dead.

"There were vital signs, no breathing — then her heart stopped."

Three quarters of the way to the hospital, the paramedics pulled over to the side of Major Mackenzie Drive. Osborne and his partner Pat Connolly tried to defibrillate the woman but couldn't.

Dr. David Wortzman, York Central's chief of emergency, had just come on shift, and at 7:45 a.m., the ambulance arrived with the woman, who still had no pulse.

"In 15 years, I've never seen a case of hypothermia arrest like this," said Wortzman. "She looked dead, her face was blue, her pupils were fixed and the monitor was flatlined. At that point, survival is less than one per cent."

"We couldn't get her temperature right away, but the old saying in emergency medicine is you can't declare until they are 'warm and dead,'" said Wortzman, explaining that the body must be warmed to 32°C before declaring someone dead.

According to internist Dr. John Blakely, who arrived on the scene shortly after the woman was brought in, if the brain is cold before you die, there is a better chance of resuscitation.

Wortzman, Blakely and the emergency staff began to gradually warm the woman's body — her stomach and bladder were flushed with warm fluids. It took 45 minutes to just get a reading on her temperature.

"I was doing it by the book, even though I wasn't giving her a hope of survival," Wortzman said. "If I hadn't heard the story from the paramedics about her moaning, I would have declared her when she came in. She looked very dead."

Wortzman said no one was sure the warming techniques would work.

At one point, when doctors were doubtful their efforts would succeed, the woman's family was told she might not make it. Her 13-year-old son was brought in to say goodbye.

"We assumed she wouldn't wake up. We assumed it was a hopeless cause, but we persisted," Blakely said.

Eventually, the warming techniques began to work and Wortzman got a temperature reading of 26°C. An hour into their efforts, electrical activity finally began to show up on the heart monitor.

"There was an occasional blip, so we shocked her and, after that, she had a normal electrical rhythm and pulse," Wortzman said.

It would be several more hours before the woman's temperature returned to normal.

Two weeks later, feeling reborn, the woman said she is so grateful to be alive that her depression is gone after almost a decade of mental illness.

"I didn't feel happy for a long time. I feel very blessed. I'm really glad they didn't give up on me," said the woman, who asked to remain anonymous.

"(Overdosing) had been a normal routine for the last four years but I always did it at my house. I put my family through too much. I really am in disbelief just hearing what my family went through — they were actually in mourning."

"I'm very calm now. I was so angry at God. Every little thing felt so enormous to me. But I feel I'm blessed, born again. He gave me a lot of chances, but this is incredible."

A pressure bruise on her forehead and a clot on her lung are the only remaining scars — a result of lying on the ground for so long.

In 35 years of practice, Blakely said he's never seen a case like it, although he has revived patients who were clinically dead.

"There are amazing stories of kids who fall in cold water and their survival is quite remarkable," he said. "They report the occasional success but you don't ever dream of anything like this happening. She's a major save. What we did worked, but it may have been pure luck."

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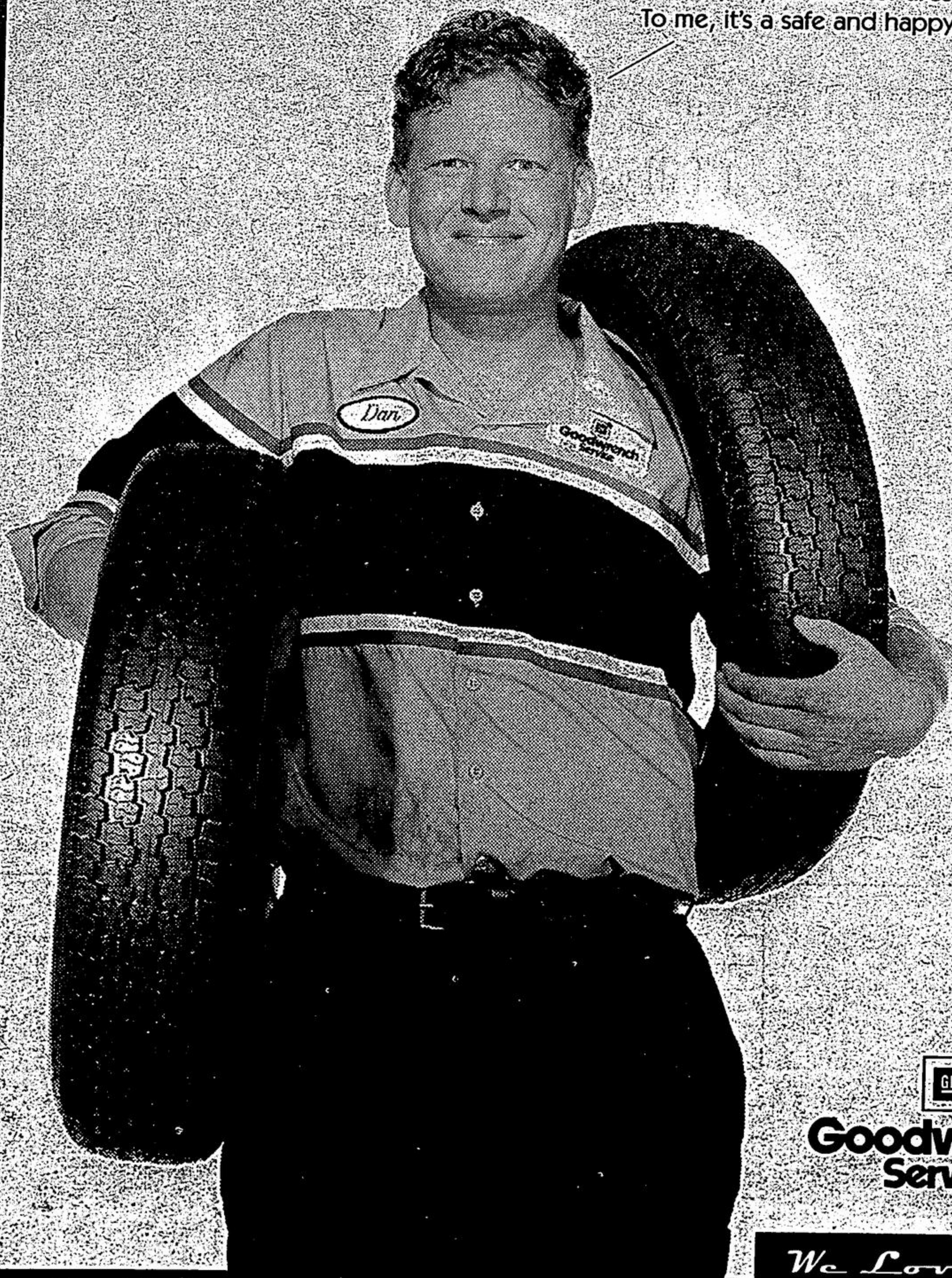
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