



23 minutes

That's how long Allen Gogarty's heart stopped. Thanks to the teamwork of two Northwell hospitals, he's back on his feet.

The sudden backache was unlike anything Allen Gogarty had felt before: An intense stabbing between his shoulder blades.

The professional musician and vocalist who plays guitar, mandolin, fiddle, tin whistle and keyboard had been having a typical day at home last December 2 when the ache began. After returning late from a gig the night before, the 48-year-old father of two had woken up early to run an errand, fallen back asleep, and then woke up again around mid-morning for a cup of coffee.

Then, out of nowhere, came the blinding pain. “I tried to stretch it out, as I’ve had back trouble before,” he says. Though never anything like this.

In a soaking sweat, Gogarty ran a bath for himself, hoping it would help. When it didn’t, his wife, Amparo Sanchez, 50, called 911.

Gogarty was feeling better by the time the ambulance arrived. He was embarrassed when the paramedics rushed in. “I thought I was making a fuss,” he says.

Nevertheless, paramedics thought it best to take him to the emergency department (ED) at Long Island Jewish (LIJ) Forest Hills — where tests revealed an alarming problem. Gogarty’s blood contained troponin, a protein that becomes elevated in the blood when there is heart damage. Physicians suspected that Gogarty had had a mild heart attack.

Gogarty was admitted to the cardiac unit for more tests and monitoring, but by 6:30 am, he was feeling worse: nauseated, and in more pain than ever.

He remembers paging a nurse for painkillers — then, nothing.

Gogarty lost consciousness. His pulse had stopped.

THE RACE TO SAVE HIS LIFE

A bedside nurse issued a Code Blue, the emergency signal to staff that someone’s heart has stopped and a patient needs immediate help.

Nurses and physicians came running into Gogarty’s room, and immediately started CPR. Gogarty was intubated, put on a ventilator to help him breathe and given high doses

of medications to restart his heart. A crowd of staffers gathered, swapping places every couple of minutes to continue pumping.

Gogarty’s heart kicked back into gear — albeit with a life-threatening irregular rhythm. “The heart was quivering and not beating right, which is dangerous,” says Syed Iqbal, DO, the director of critical care at LIJ Forest Hills, who led staffers as they worked to stabilize Gogarty.

Even for Dr. Iqbal, a seasoned ICU physician, the scene felt hectic. “I always tell patients that coding is never what it looks like on TV,” he says. “But in his case, it almost was like a code out of a movie.”

Dr. Iqbal and his colleagues applied a defibrillator, a device that delivers an electric shock to the heart to put it back in a normal rhythm, to Gogarty’s chest. His response was poor. “Every time we delivered a shock, he would wake up, then go out again after a few seconds,” Dr. Iqbal says.

After 23 long minutes, Gogarty’s heartbeat finally stabilized. Physicians suspected his cardiac arrest was caused by an obstruction of blood flow to the heart. They needed to run a coronary angiogram, an X-ray of the heart’s blood vessels, to figure out where the blockage was. While LIJ Forest Hills does not have the equipment to perform the test, its sister facility, North Shore University Hospital (NSUH) in Manhasset — home to the Sandra Atlas Bass Heart Center — does, and was a just short ambulance ride away.

Gaurav Rao, MD, Northwell’s director of interventional cardiology, remembers Gogarty’s arrival. His case was as serious as any the physician had ever seen. “His heart was essentially flickering,” Dr. Rao says.

Dr. Rao wasn’t sure Gogarty would make it. “The chance of a person coming back from that is extremely slim,” he says.

To buy time for the angiogram,



ABOVE: Gogarty (center) with some of the MDs who saved his life, including Gaurav Rao, MD (beside Gogarty, second from right).

LEFT: Friends raised more than \$35,000 for Gogarty’s family while he was out of work, healing.



“He was dead. It’s extremely rare when a patient codes for that long and then is able to survive. Mr. Gogarty was very lucky.” — Syed Iqbal, DO

Dr. Rao needed to build on the expert work by the staff at LIJ Forest Hills to further stabilize Gogarty — and fast. To do it, he surgically implanted a device called an Impella in Gogarty’s heart. The Impella would keep Gogarty’s heart pumping, circulating oxygenated blood throughout his body. Then he normalized Gogarty’s blood pressure with medication.

The angiogram results were sobering: Gogarty had a 100% blockage in one artery and a 90% blockage in another. Given Gogarty’s critical condition, Dr. Rao decided it would be best to treat the vessels separately, in two operations. He would use angioplasty — a procedure in which he would thread a thin wire through the blocked artery, inflate a balloon inside to widen the area and insert a metallic scaffold called a stent to keep it open.

Dr. Rao tackled the completely blocked vessel first. Gogarty responded well. A few days later, Dr. Rao repaired his other diseased artery.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

When Gogarty awoke in a hospital room, he was surprised to find himself in Manhasset — not Queens.

As his eyes fluttered open and he registered the presence of his wife and good friend beside the bed, his confusion grew. The last thing he remembered was paging a nurse in the LIJ Forest Hills emergency department.

Gently, the duo explained to Gogarty that he had nearly died. “You stopped breathing for 23 minutes,” his friend said.

Gogarty needed a beat to take it all in. Then, after a long pause, he finally spoke. “Well, that’s my record,” he replied, looking his friend square in the eye. “What’s yours?”

His friend let out a relieved laugh, and Sanchez felt her eyes prick with tears. Her husband had survived — and apparently so had his sense of humor. “I was so happy,” she says.

After a six-day hospital stay, Gogarty went home to recover.

There, Sanchez and the couple’s sons, Liam, 16, and Mario, 13, nursed him back to health, bringing him meals and making sure he took his medications. “It was very scary for the boys,” Gogarty remembers. “Initially, it was looking like they would face Christmas without their Da.”

Gogarty set his sights on rebuilding his strength. Two weeks after his discharge, he had a follow-up exam with his cardiologist, who cleared him for light activity. Slowly, Gogarty began taking short walks around the house and his neighborhood. By Christmas, he was well enough to cook dinner for his family, one of their annual traditions.

A few months later, shortly before St. Patrick’s Day, Gogarty got the green light to start performing. So far, he’s been ramping up slowly. “I’m probably back to about 80% of my workload,” he says. Every few months, he visits his cardiologist for blood tests, an echocardiogram (an ultrasound of the heart, used to evaluate heart function) and a blood pressure check.

He’s also tweaked his routine, logging hour-long daily walks, eating a healthier diet and taking cholesterol-lowering medication along with baby aspirin, a blood thinner. “I was advised not to overindulge, and that’s what I’ve been doing,” he says.

Gogarty still finds what he went through difficult to grasp — to have been so close to death. Gaining a second chance to raise his children, sing and perform music feels like the ultimate lucky turn.

In March, at an emotional reunion at North Shore University Hospital, Gogarty met with members of the care team that saved his life. He also sang a few songs to the group — his personal tribute.

“The gift of life has been handed back to me,” he said before the crowd. “It’s something that we take for granted that I won’t ever take for granted again.”



Scan the QR code to watch a video of Allen Gogarty playing music at one of his favorite venues.