

Carson City 911 dispatcher gives instructions to save baby

BY F.T. NORTON

A Carson City dispatcher likely saved a newborn's life Wednesday morning.

When a call came in to emergency dispatch at 8:22 a.m., communications supervisor Cindy Merrell heard a distraught mother, barking dogs and a crying toddler. But what anyone else would have missed in the cacophony was what the woman said between screams — “My baby's not breathing!” Merrell heard it right away.

“The baby's not breathing,” the veteran emergency dispatcher can be heard repeating on the 911 call recording.

Merrell said she turned to coworker Liz Hertz and relayed the information. Hertz called out medics. Then Merrell, herself a mother of four and grandmother of six, went to work. She opened flip cards and tried to get the woman's attention.

“I'm going to help you,” Merrell shouted over the din. “I need you to calm down so we can help your baby, OK!” When the mother responded that she understood, Merrell began giving her directions. “I need you to put your baby on a flat surface,” said Merrell. “Tilt the head back and see if he's breathing.”

The woman wailed as a toddler could be heard in the background crying.

“I want you to breathe two puffs of air into the baby's lungs, just enough to make the chest rise,” said Merrell. The line became silent as the mother did as she was told. Then the woman can be heard crying, “Oh my God. My son's dead, my son's dead.”

“Don't give up,” said Merrell. “I need you to help the baby.” She instructed the mother to do chest compressions. Through the line Merrell could hear the thumping as the woman did as she was told.

Everyone in the dispatch center became fixated on what was unfolding, including John Mason, a system technician with AT&T, who hours later was still in awe of what he'd witnessed. “It was just so amazing,” he said.

Merrell worried the mother was going to stop because she kept repeating her son was dead.

“Don't give up. Just keep going until the medics get there. Keep going. Keep going,” Merrell said. “I need you to help the baby. Don't give up.”

For six minutes, Merrell remained calm while the frantic mother wailed, the dogs barked and a toddler cried.

And then, Merrell heard a weak cry.

“Oh, he just started crying,” the mother yelled.

When paramedics arrived, Merrell hung up.

The baby's family declined to comment. According to Renown Regional Medical Center in Reno, the 3-week-old infant is in good condition.

“It's absolutely amazing — Cindy staying on the phone, calming the lady down and talking her through it, probably saved the baby's life,” said Sheriff Ken Furlong. “Cindy doesn't get rattled. She's an amazing woman.”

Merrell said normally after an emotional call, she will get up from her desk and go into another room to cry.

“But John Mason was in the room,” she said with a laugh. “I turn around and he's got these tears, and Liz has got these tears, so I had to be like, ‘Oh, it's just a job.’”

For Mason, however, the experience was unforgettable.

“I got to just sit there and listen to this dispatcher and the way she took control of the situation and actually saved the baby's life,” said Mason, a former Marine. “I've seen a lot of stuff that didn't affect me. This actually touched me. When that baby coughed we were (cheering).

“We were just overwhelmed with joy that one life was saved by the training and composure of this particular dispatcher,” Mason said. “I think she's a hero.” Merrell was more humble about her actions.

“I was just glad that the baby was alive and I could help the mom,” said Merrell.

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