

911 dispatcher helps saves young girl's life

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BONNIE SHORTT / Staff Writer / Published Thursday, May 31, 2007 1:50 am

With the help of a calm Wise County 911 emergency dispatcher, a Big Stone Gap father was able to save his daughter from choking on Easter candy.

Fletcher Dean and his wife Jane Meade-Dean are parents to three young children.

On March 30, Dean was home with all three children while his wife was traveling for business.

Maggie, their 4-year-old daughter, was at the kitchen table while the boys were outside playing, Dean said in a phone interview last week.

He turned his back for an instant, then heard Maggie cough, Dean recalled.

When he turned around, Maggie was grabbing her throat and had a panicked look in her eyes, according to Dean.

Dean asked Maggie if she could breathe and she shook her head "no," he said.

Dean tried to administer the Heimlich maneuver to dislodge the candy, but was scared of doing it too hard in fear of hurting her, he said.

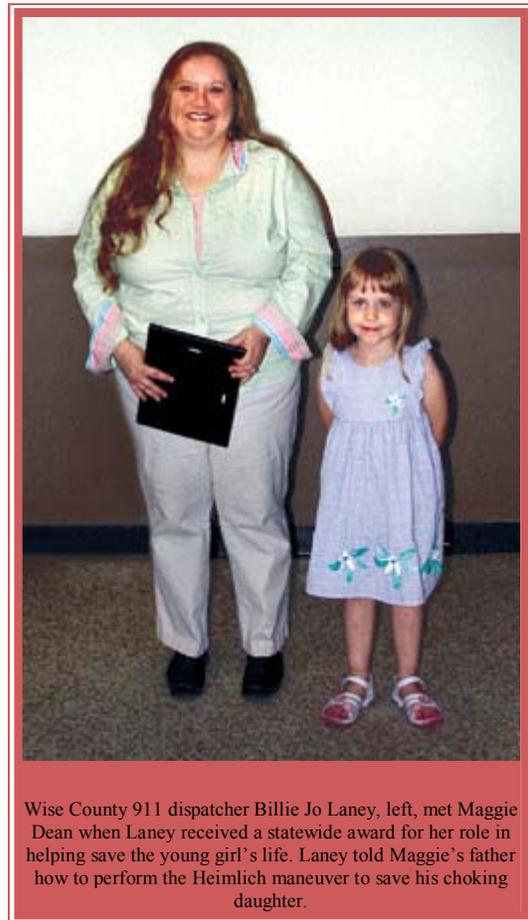
Call saves a life

Dean made the quick decision to call 911.

The dispatcher who answered, Billie Jo Laney, asked him to try the Heimlich maneuver again, Dean said.

She talked him through the proper placement of hands and told him to pull up harder than he previously did, according to Dean.

While Laney was talking him through the Heimlich maneuver, another dispatcher was preparing an ambulance to respond to the Deans' home, Laney said.



Wise County 911 dispatcher Billie Jo Laney, left, met Maggie Dean when Laney received a statewide award for her role in helping save the young girl's life. Laney told Maggie's father how to perform the Heimlich maneuver to save his choking daughter.

Dean did as he was told, and a small chocolate egg popped out of Maggie's mouth, he said.

He was so relieved and scared that he doesn't even recall thanking Laney, he said. He only remembers hanging up the phone and cleaning up Maggie, Dean said.

Laney laughed when told Dean couldn't remember if he thanked her. He did, she said.

As he cleaned his daughter, Dean said, he realized what a great service Laney had done for all of them.

Laney remained so calm throughout the ordeal, he said. That blew him away, Dean said. He was still shaking an hour after the incident, he said.

Greatly-earned recognition

Later that night, Dean said, he wrote a letter to Sheriff Ronnie Oakes.

Fletcher didn't know Laney's name at the time, he said. He just wanted to find some way to let her know she was appreciated, he said.

In his letter, he asked Oakes to pass along his thanks.

When the sheriff's office received Dean's letter, no one knew Laney was the one who deserved thanks. The letter was circulated, Laney said, and a supervisor identified her as the dispatcher who helped Dean.

Laney went on to receive an award from the Virginia office of emergency medical services for her lifesaving efforts, according to Oakes. The award was presented to her at a May 10 county Board of Supervisors meeting.

Oakes described Laney as "tremendous" and well deserving of credit for her fast action.

She has been employed since July 2006 and has gone through various forms of training, Oakes said.

All the dispatchers do a wonderful job, he added.

Laney was much more humble about her actions.

All of the other dispatchers have done the same thing to help a family in need, Laney said. The Dean family just took the time to write a letter and have her recognized, she said. The highlight of being nominated for the statewide award was being able to meet Maggie, Laney said.

In most instances, the dispatchers never know the outcome of calls they receive, she said.