

The Extra Mile: Elka Rachel Travis, Nurse Practitioner



"It was about teamwork, leadership, communication, and being prepared for anything in any situation, all elements that have been cultivated within me during my seven years at NYU Langone," says Elka Rachel Travis, Nurse Practitioner at NYU Langone Hospital—Long Island.

After a man went into cardiac arrest on her flight, the NYU Langone Hospital—Long Island nurse practitioner was on the floor doing chest compressions in minutes. Along with three other volunteer medical professionals, Travis administered electrode pads to reset his heart and keep him breathing through an emergency landing.

It was Thursday, July 11, and all Elka Rachel Travis wanted was a big fresh bowl of greens and a hot shower. After two weeks as a leader with her 14-year-old son's Boy Scout group—hiking 100 miles through the New Mexico wilderness carrying a 50-pound backpack—the nurse practitioner at NYU Langone Hospital—Long Island boarded a Southwest Airlines flight headed back to New York's LaGuardia Airport, ready to finally relax.

The universe had a different plan. About 90 minutes into the journey, a voice came over the loudspeaker: "If you're a healthcare provider, please identify yourself." Travis didn't waste time. She went to the front of the plane, where a flight attendant took her to a man seated in a window seat. "Are you all right, sir?" Travis asked the man, who was around 70. He didn't respond, even when shaken. "Up close, I could see his skin was exceptionally blue and ashen," Travis says. She knew this could be cardiac arrest, which could be life-threatening.

What happened next happened fast. As Travis lowered the man to the narrow aisle to administer CPR, three other medical professionals arrived to volunteer their help: two physicians and another nurse practitioner. On her knees doing forceful chest compressions, Travis called for the airplane's Automated External Defibrillator (AED) bag and medical kit, which the FAA mandates be carried on all commercial flights. The doctors pulled out an AED battery and electrode pads, which Travis helped place on the man's chest and side to safely administer electricity to reset his heart. But after repeated attempts, they still couldn't get a shockable heart rhythm. "You want to be able to shock the heart and get it moving," says Travis. "But since we couldn't achieve that, so we just had to continue the chest compressions and follow protocol."

The other nurse practitioner took over the chest compressions—the intense procedure requires so much effort that a person fatigues after two to four minutes—while Travis attempted to place an IV. One of the doctors found two vials of epinephrine (the primary drug used during cardiac arrests to increase blood pressure and blood flow through the arteries) in the AED bag and injected the medicine into the man's outer thigh. The other physician placed a bag-valve mask—a handheld device that provides positive pressure ventilation to people who aren't breathing normally—over the man's mouth.

"It was clear that we needed extra sets of hands because someone needed to continue chest compressions, someone needed to hold the mask on him and compress the bag, and someone had to keep his head stable," Travis recalls. "I asked the flight attendant to call over the speaker to get my other troop leader and some of the Boy Scouts." Three of the teens—who all knew CPR as part of their scout

training—arrived and took turns doing chest compressions and providing rescue breaths (exhaling into the airway and lungs of the man).

Finally, a pulse was detected—though it was weak. Since the team had already used both vials of epinephrine, the teen scouts went up and down the aisles asking passengers for EpiPens, which contain small doses of epinephrine and are usually used for allergic reactions. Travis administered three donated EpiPens into the patient's thigh to help keep his heart beating.

Just 20 minutes after the initial announcement, the pilot announced they'd make an emergency landing in Pittsburgh. But there was one more challenge: How to keep the man alive—continuing rescue breaths, maintaining an open airway, and angling his head so he could take in the maximum amount of oxygen—while keeping Travis and the other volunteers secure as the plane descended? The team moved the patient to a row of empty seats and found relatively stable seated positions. Recalls Travis, "I held his mask on and managed to sit in a very small space near him." Upon arriving in Pittsburgh, multiple emergency medical personnel quickly boarded the plane and took over.

The experience will be with Travis for a long time. "It was about teamwork, leadership, communication, and being prepared for anything in any situation—all elements that have been cultivated within me during my seven years at NYU Langone," she says. "An instant community of people united to save this man's life. Alone, none of us would have been able to do what we accomplished together."