It was just a typical day at Liberty Middle School. Sixth-grader, Christian Swope, was eating his lunch in his class Wednesday when he sensed a classmate was in danger. He instantly recognized the signs that his friend was choking and couldn’t breathe. Christian ran to his aid, performed the Heimlich maneuver, and successfully dislodged the food from his friend’s throat before a tragedy could occur. He is only 12 years old.

“My friend was choking and couldn’t breathe,” said Christian. “My Auntie is a nurse and she taught us how to do CPR and the Heimlich so I wasn’t scared because I knew what to do.”

“I have a skeleton that I bought during nursing school so last year I taught my boys how to do different safety moves,” explained Christian’s very proud Auntie, Ms. Mercy Aguilar. “I was just so ecstatic and shocked when I found out. When you get a call from the school during the day you don’t expect it to be good news. I was just speechless and absolutely proud when they told me what he did. He actually saved a life.”
She added, “When I was teaching both of them the safety moves, I never in my wildest dreams thought they would ever put them to use. But he did. I’m absolutely proud of him. He actually got it and was effective using the maneuver.”

After the frightening experience when they determined his friend would be okay, Christian said his classmates, “called me a lifesaver and they clapped for me.”

When asked how he felt Christian said, “I feel good. And I feel proud of myself. When I got home my auntie called me a hero.”

Liberty Middle School Principal, Keisa Vincent, thinks young Christian is a hero, too.

“Christian stepped in and took charge of the situation and saved his friend’s life,” said Vincent. “In a situation where many adults may have panicked, Christian was calm and knew what to do. To know how to do the Heimlich maneuver at 12-years old is amazing. He’s definitely a hero in my book.”

When Newton County School System Superintendent Samantha Fuhrey learned of Christian’s actions she made it a point to meet him. Thursday morning, she paid a surprise visit to Liberty Middle School to meet Christian and present him with her Superintendent’s Coin of Distinction.

“This coin is reserved for the individuals who go above and beyond because it’s the right thing to do; they are selfless and demonstrate their commitment to others through their actions and words,” Fuhrey explained to Christian as she presented him the coin. “Very few people receive the Superintendent’s Coin of Distinction, but you get it because you’re a hero. You saved someone’s life when you performed the Heimlich maneuver in the classroom and that is most definitely worthy of the Superintendent’s Coin of Distinction.”

“He’s a remarkable young man,” Fuhrey noted. “I am beyond proud of him. I reserve the Coin of Distinction for only the best of the best, and Christian definitely meets the criteria.”

Fuhrey has only awarded the Coin of Distinction to those who exceed expectations and relatively few coins have been presented during her tenure as school superintendent as it is saved as her highest honor. Students in a class at South Salem Elementary School received coins when they worked together to rescue their teacher, who had a medical emergency on the playground. In another instance, she travelled to Henry County Schools to reward a student who stopped a high school baseball game in the midst of an at-bat to comfort an Eastside High School pitcher whose father has passed away unexpectedly after a medical emergency at a prior game. Most notably, Fuhrey awarded her Coin of Distinction to American civil rights hero, the late Dr. Frederick Douglas Reese who was a member of Selma’s “Courageous Eight”.

“That’s how elite Christian is---he shares this recognition with Dr. Reese! It really is a very unique award,” said Fuhrey. “So congratulations to Christian on a job well done. I hope his coin serves as a reminder of just how extraordinary he is.”

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