'YOU SAVED MY LIFE':

FOREST HILLS TEACHER RESCUES STUDENT FROM CHOKING

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Tricia Toews can't tell you how she knew something was horribly wrong in her kindergarten classroom. She just sensed it.

Ms. Toews was eating lunch at her desk at Forest Hills Elementary while her students did the same. The first five minutes of their break is always silent to allow chatty five-year-olds time to slow down, quiet down, and actually eat.

And it was quiet.

Then she heard it, a muffled sound at the back of the room, so vague that maybe it was nothing, but her intuition told her otherwise. She looked up and locked eyes with Za'vion, a bubbly student with round cheeks and a proclivity toward hugs.

His hands were at his neck. Panic was in his eyes.

“I said, 'Are you choking?' and he didn't answer. Right away I saw he was struggling. I could just tell he wasn't able to breathe,” Ms. Toews said later that night.

Toews had been a medical assistant before going back to school to get her teaching degree as a single mother, a laptop on one knee and her bouncing baby on the other. This is her second year as a classroom teacher.

And the instant she saw Za'vion's little fingers at his neck, she said, that medical training and motherly instinct kicked in.
She ran across the room, stood behind him, and began the
Heimlich maneuver, one hand wrapped around the other
fist, thrusting upward between his little ribs.

*Once.*
*Twice.*
*Three times.*
*Four.*

“There was a moment there where I just kept Heimliching
and I thought, ‘Something’s gotta work.’ It was just keep
going, keep going. I don’t think I’ve ever been that scared,”
she said. “His life was literally in my hands.”

Finally she heard a little cough, and a sound like Za’vion
was trying to talk with his mouth full.

“It wasn’t like the movies where the food goes flying out ten
feet in the air,” she said. “I asked him, ‘Are you breathing
now? Are you breathing?’ He looked at me and he nodded
his head. I was just so grateful.”

Toews called the school nurse to take Za’vion for a check-
up. She asked another staff member to cover her class for a
moment.

And she went to the empty room across the hall, collapsed,
and cried.

“My hands were shaking afterwards. Your adrenaline is
going so much. There was this sense of relief that you did it
and he’s okay and you’re okay and everyone in the class is
okay,” she said.

But also, “I just couldn’t help but think, ‘What if I wasn’t able
to do that right? What if something went wrong?’ I love
these babies so much. It was so emotional for me.”

The next day Za’vion was on the playground, playing
football catch with his teacher and red light green light with
his friends. He remembered it all began with a Flamin’ Hot
Dorito that he ate a bit too fast.

“When I had my choked time, I went out of breath, and then
it felt like I almost died,” he said. “Ms. Toews held my
tummy and pushed it back and pushed it back until the chip
came out. I scared everybody in the class.”
His mama was so happy he was okay, he said, but she told him he has to chew slower at lunch.

“And I'm banned from chips,” he said. “My mom said I can’t have them, my nana, my auntie, everyone in my family said I can't have no more chips because I choked on one.”

He shrugs. It seems like a sacrifice he’s willing to make.

He remembered when the nurse brought him back to the classroom. “I gave Ms. Toews a big hug,” he said, “And I told her, ‘You saved my life.’”

For Ms. Toews, the baby who was bouncing on her knee during her college classes is now a first grader down the hall from her classroom. The work has its challenges, but on days like Thursday, it feels like fate brought her to teaching, and into the lives of her students.

“The path that you are supposed to be on, or that you have taken…” she trails off. “Sometimes there are reasons why.”