

It's been nearly two years since Warren Kelsey suffered a massive heart attack like the one that took the life of NBC News Washington Bureau Chief Tim Russert. Kelsey, 72, often wonders why he lived while Russert didn't.

"Some get a second chance, some don't," he said.

Kelsey is certain that he is here today thanks to the level of care he was given within minutes of suffering what is called a widow maker, a potentially fatal blockage of coronary arteries caused by a buildup of plaque.

Even a small amount of plaque in this area can rupture and cause death. From the minute a widow maker hits, there is a five-minute window of time to get to a hospital or receive emergency care.

Kelsey credits his survival to the fast response of well-trained firefighters and paramedics from Station 60, which is in close proximity to his home.

"Their response was real quick," Kelsey recalled. In a matter of minutes Fire Captain Brent Carter, paramedic Therron Hubbell and firefighter Mark Grasso from Station 60 were at his side.

The AMR ambulance drivers were going to take Kelsey to Inland Valley Medical Center until veteran Captain Carter redirected the unit to Riverside Community Hospital (RCH). The advice was critical; although farther away, RCH has a special team for dealing with critical cardiac patients.

Paramedic Hubbell rode in the ambulance with Kelsey and relayed his vital signs ahead to the doctors and nurses in the Chest Pain Center during the 25 minute trip to the hospital.

When he arrived at Riverside Community Hospital Kelsey was rolled into the operating room where an artery widening stent immediately cleared the clog in his artery and restored blood flow to his heart.

It was the speed with which these procedures were implemented, not just the procedures themselves that Kelsey credits with saving his life. Regular emergency rooms often do not have the protocol in place to treat heart attack victims quickly and efficiently, he says.

Kelsey lost some capacity in his heart and today has to rely on a pacemaker and defibrillator. But the former developer and lender doesn't want to think about the alternative.

And even though he thinks government could do a better job of cutting costs in tough times and the community needs to be more practical about the services it requires, he'd hate to see Station 60 or any of the fire stations that serve Canyon Lake close because of a budget shortfall caused by the current economy.

On June 7 the voters of Canyon Lake will be asked to approve Measure E, a public safety tax that will maintain high levels of police, emergency medical, and fire protection services over the next five years and help eliminate a temporary budget shortfall.

If Measure E does not pass, there is a possibility that one of the three fire stations serving Canyon Lake would be closed and response times would increase. If the closure happens, survivability rates of heart attack and stroke victims may decline.

Kelsey said, "I can't say enough good things about Station 60 and the ambulance service." Kelsey knows firsthand that rapid medical treatment in an emergency often makes the difference between life and death. It is estimated that each minute a heart attack victims goes untreated lessens the likelihood of survival by 10 percent.

And he also knows that Canyon Lake is a community with a large population of elderly citizens, many who suffer from some form of heart disease.

"It really comes down to cost versus benefits," he said. "And it seems to me the benefits are in keeping Station 60 open."