

Heart Smarts

The American Heart Association works to educate women about the dangers of heart disease

by Beth Luberecki

On July 4, 1997, fifty-three-year-old Carole Anne Fallon was traveling with her husband from the U.S. to Canada, where he was to begin a work assignment. Fallon was in the passenger seat as the car traveled in heavy traffic through Canada. Around 6:30 p.m., with little warning, “a wrecking ball hit me in the center of my chest,” Fallon recalls. “Then a one-thousand-pound elephant joined it. It was the most intensive, crushing pain.”

Fallon was having a heart attack. “I started to hear roaring in my ears,” she says. “My husband’s voice sounded like I was down a well. Basically, your life flashes before your eyes.”

Unfortunately, many women in the United States go through experiences similar to Fallon’s. According to the American Heart Association, heart disease is the number-one killer of women. One in five U.S. females has some form of cardiovascular disease, with African-American and Mexican-American women at higher risk for heart disease and stroke than Caucasian women of comparable socioeconomic status. Of the women who die suddenly from coronary heart disease, 64 percent had no previous symptoms.

Fallon was lucky to survive her experience. Because she worked as a nurse, she recognized some of the signs of a heart attack. And because she received medical treatment quickly, her chances were greatly improved.



Former oncology nurse and Sanibel resident Carole Anne Fallon has “turned her life around” since her 1997 heart attack. She helps others do the same as a volunteer with HealthPark’s cardiac program.

SPREADING THE WORD

Many women today still don’t know much about heart disease and how it affects them. The American Heart Association aims to change that through its Go Red for Women campaign. Started

in February 2004, the campaign educates women about heart disease and offers tips and information on healthy eating and exercise. It also illustrates ways women can reduce their risk of heart disease through smoking cessation, weight main-

PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Save the Date

Throughout the year, the American Heart Association holds a number of local events designed to help the public learn more about heart disease. Here’s what’s coming up in Lee County in 2006.

February serves as **American Heart Month**. During American Heart Month, volunteers go out into the local community to raise funds for research and education and to provide information about heart disease and stroke. **National Wear Red Day** takes place February 3. Companies across the local region and the nation encourage their employees to

wear red to raise awareness of the American Heart Association’s Go Red for Women initiative.

May marks **American Stroke Month**. During that time, the American Heart Association works to educate people about the risk factors and signs of stroke, the nation’s number-three killer.

The **2006 Lee Heart Ball** takes place on May 27 at the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa in Bonita Springs. This annual black-tie event features dinner, dancing, and an auction. The 2005 ball raised \$416,442 for the



tenance, blood pressure control, and blood cholesterol management.

According to Kathy Shierling, vice president for the Lee Memorial Health System's Heart and Vascular Institute and HealthPark Medical Center, "Many women think that a heart attack just can't happen to them and that it's a man's disease." She says women also wait longer to seek treatment, which affects their mortality rates and surgery outcomes. "We've got to take this in hand and really go out and educate people in the community," she says.

Events like the American Heart Association's National Wear Red Day, held on the first Friday in February, help to get the message out. According to Danielle Broderick, communications director for the Lee and Collier County chapters of the American Heart Association, around twenty Lee County companies participated in 2005's National Wear Red Day, including Oswald Trippe and Company, Edison National Bank, and the Southwest Florida Regional Medical Center.

Bonita Springs-based Source Interlink was one of the largest participants. The company initially got involved with the American Heart Association because its CEO, Leslie Flegel, had personal experience with heart disease. Martha White, Source Interlink's vice president of

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American Heart Association. The goal for 2006, the ball's twenty-fifth anniversary year, is \$500,000.

The **Lee Heart Walk** typically occurs during the last Saturday of October. The date for the 2006 walk has not officially been set as of press time. Some 2,500 people headed to Centennial Park in downtown Ft. Myers for 2005's 5K fund-raising walk.

For more information about these and other events, call the local chapter of the American Heart Association at 239-498-9288, or visit www.americanheart.org.

human resources, says the cause was something that “everyone took to. It’s just a natural thing for us to do.”

Lee Memorial is an active supporter of the American Heart Association and also has its own education program called Women’s HeartAdvantage. “It mirrors Go Red for Women but is more explicit and prescriptive about goals and plans for addressing heart disease for women,” says Shierling. As part of the program, Lee Memorial holds women’s health fairs and brings in speakers like Dr. Nieca Goldberg, author of *Women Are Not Small Men*. It also conducts health risk assessments for women, measuring cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and other factors. “When you get the hard numbers in your hand, it’s hard to argue with those,” says Shierling.

Shierling believes that people like Fallon help to put a face on the disease. That’s why Shierling, as chairperson of the American Heart Association’s 2005



The American Heart Association holds many fund-raising and community awareness events throughout the year. Pictured left: Ft. Myers Mayor Jim Humphrey and his wife, Nancy, at the 2005 Heart Ball. Above: At the 2004 Heart Walk, KB Home sponsored the “Kids Corner,” making the event fun for all ages.



Lee Heart Walk, was instrumental in Fallon’s selection as the 2005 Lee Heart Walk Honorary Survivor. “It helps to bring this issue home by having stories like Carole’s,” Shierling says. “It really is more powerful than any physician standing up there talking.”

“I want to show people that you can come back from a heart attack,” says Fallon. “It’s up to you. You need to change your life.”

ONE WOMAN’S STORY

After an ambulance came to take Fallon to the hospital, “I have no recollection other than hearing people discussing me,” she says. “I remember people saying, ‘She doesn’t look good.’ The big joke is that I saw the light but I refused to go to it because I’m stubborn.”

Fallon was diagnosed with coronary artery disease, with four blocked arteries serving as the cause of her heart attack.

Championing the Cause

Matthew Mullen uses his experiences to help others

Matthew Mullen is no ordinary twelve-year-old. While other kids his age are playing baseball or hanging out at the mall, he’s making speeches and working to raise funds for the American Heart Association.

That’s because Mullen was born with a heart defect called tetralogy of fallot. The condition caused him to have blockages in his arteries that required five pacemaker operations when he was only a year old. At the age of seven, he underwent surgery again to have his pulmonary valve replaced. Soon his pacemaker will also have to be replaced.

But despite all this, Mullen never gives up and willingly shares his story to raise awareness and to help other kids out there facing similar situations. “He loves to do things for the American Heart Association,” says his mother, Stacy. “He works the room at events. Oh, my goodness, does he work a room.” That ability was on display at the

American Heart Association’s 2005 Lee and Collier County Heart Balls, at which Mullen helped to raise nearly \$40,000.

Former Cape Coral residents now living in Punta Gorda, Mullen and his mother are members of the American Heart Association’s American Heart Heroes program, which holds activities throughout the year for Florida children with cardiovascular diseases. The centerpiece of the program is a visit to Camp Boggy Creek. Fully staffed and medically equipped to handle cardiac emergencies during Heart Heroes Week, the Central Florida camp provides a place where kids like Mullen can just be kids. Mullen lists fishing, archery, and basketball



Fund-raising dynamo Matthew Mullen and his mom, Stacy, donate their time to help Florida children with cardiac disease.

as some of his favorite activities. “He loves being at the camp,” says Stacy. “He shines there.”

Mullen has a lot of plans for the future. He’d like to be a counselor at Camp Boggy Creek one day. He’d love to be in commercials. And he hopes to eventually raise \$1 million for the American Heart Association. “He has so much to give and offer, and

I just can’t believe he was dealt the hand he was dealt,” says Stacy. “But he’s going to make the most of it.”

For more information about the American Heart Association’s American Heart Heroes program and Camp Boggy Creek, call 239-498-9288, or visit www.americanheart.org.



The AHA's annual Heart Walk is its signature event. In 2005, over one million walkers participated in more than 600 events across the nation.

Doctors treated her condition with medication, and it continues to be medically managed today.

"Emotionally, it took an incredible toll on me," she says of her experience. After she was discharged from the hospital, she found herself in a new country where she didn't know anyone. She was weak and short of breath and often very scared.

"But what I did is turn my life around," Fallon says. "I started watching what I eat and trying to exercise." She now lives on Sanibel, where she swims in her pool, bikes, and walks. Following the South Beach Diet has helped her to lose and maintain her weight.

Fallon thinks stress was a big factor in her illness. "When I do something, I do it 200 percent," says the former oncology nurse. "I had to learn to relax." Meditation and yoga helped her to calm down, and she now teaches others in the local community about stress management as a volunteer with HealthPark's cardiac program.

"I don't know anybody who hasn't been touched by heart disease," Fallon says. "A



lot of heart disease can still be prevented if you take preventive measures. Hopefully I'm going to raise awareness by getting up and telling my story."

TAKING CONTROL

Women often ignore symptoms of heart disease, sometimes causing irreparable damage to their hearts. Other times they are misdiagnosed by doctors, because heart disease affects women differently than men. So it's important for women to know what they can do to prevent the disease and how to recognize heart attack warning signs.

The American Heart Association recommends a minimum of thirty minutes of exercise most days of the week. It says women should eat a balanced diet, emphasizing a variety of fruits, vegetables, grains, low-fat or non-fat dairy products, fish, legumes, and sources of protein low in saturated fat. Women shouldn't smoke and should schedule regular visits with their doctors.

Most heart attacks start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort, so women often

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Volunteers at the 2005 Heart Ball
donned crazy hats to generate interest
in raffle ticket sales.

aren't sure what's wrong. But there are signs of a heart attack, and it's necessary for women to be aware of them. They include discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes or that goes away and comes back; discomfort in other areas of the upper body, including the arms, back, neck, jaw, or stomach; shortness of breath; and sweating, nausea, or lightheadedness.

"What I hope women learn from Carole is to identify the symptoms and to seek help before they get into the situation where Carole was," says Shierling. "We'd certainly like to see women take the risk factors seriously and do the types of things that can prevent heart disease."

For more information about the Go Red for Women campaign, visit www.americanheart.org. For more information about Lee Memorial Health System's Women's HeartAdvantage initiative, visit www.leememorial.org/CardiacCare/wha/wha-index.asp. 🌴

Beth Luberecki is a freelance writer and the features editor of Times of the Islands.

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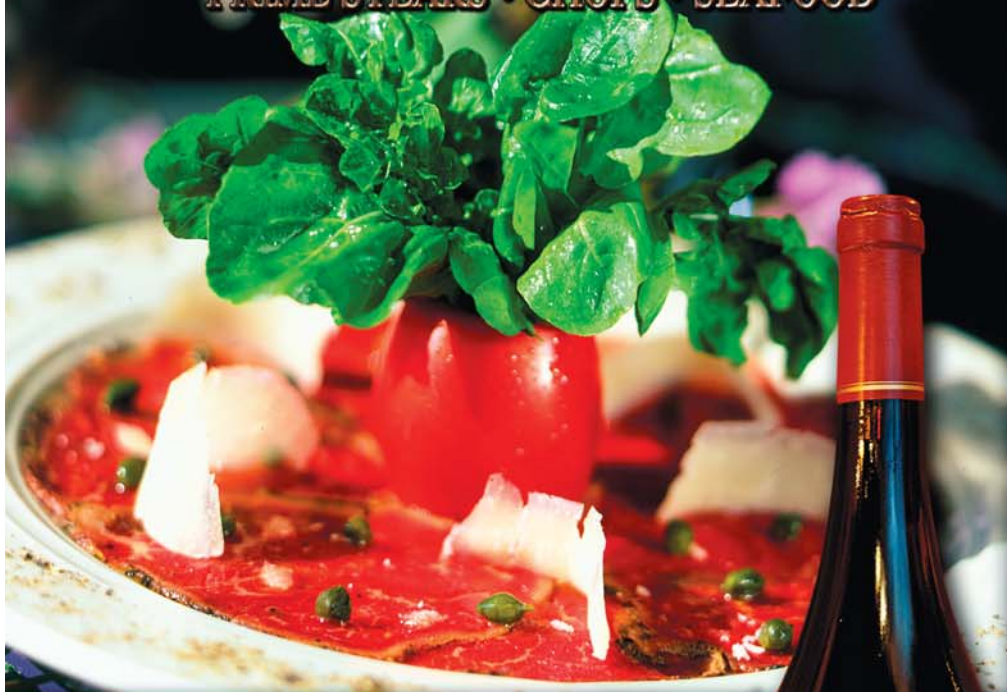
The American Heart Association offers the following goals for women seeking to reduce their risk of heart disease.

Total cholesterol: Less than 200 mg/dL
LDL (bad) cholesterol: LDL cholesterol goals vary depending on risk factors
HDL (good) cholesterol: 50 mg/dL or higher
Triglycerides: Less than 150 mg/dL
Blood pressure: Less than 120/80 mmHg
Body Mass Index (BMI): Less than 25 Kg/m²
Waist circumference: Less than 35 inches

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION

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