

# An Interview with Stephan Esser, M.D.

by Mark Huberman



*Stephan Esser, M.D. is the grandson of the legendary Dr. William Esser, a co-founder of the NHA and the owner-operator of the famous Dr. Esser's Health Ranch in Lake Worth, Florida. Dr. Stephan Esser is a physician, author and motivational speaker specializing in sports medicine and lifestyle modification. He is dedicated to empowering individuals to achieve their best health and maximize fitness, fun and function. Dr. Esser completed a Bachelor of Science degree at Palm Beach Atlantic University, Medical School at the University of South Florida College of Medicine, a residency in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School/Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, and a Fellowship in Sports Medicine at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, FL. He currently works as the Sports and Spine Physician with Heekin Orthopedics in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. Prior to his career in medicine, he was a competitive tennis player, achieving a ranking of number one in the US in Men's Open Doubles (2002).*

## **What was it like growing up with your grandfather, the legendary Dr. William Esser?**

It was truly a blessing to be with someone who not only lived the message of good health with such sincerity, but also to see day in and day out the positive outcomes in his patients' lives. That really had a radical influence on my upbringing and my career as a physician.

## **Did your family all live by his famous Health Ranch in Lake Worth?**

We were a very European family, so there were three generations living under one roof. We all lived with my grandfather and, of course, we ate most of our meals together and spent lots of time at his ranch.

## **When you say "European family," where exactly are the Esser family roots?**

My family comes from Germany. My grandfather's parents both came over from Germany as tailors. They opened up Esser Brothers Costume Shop in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Then my grandfather and my father moved from Pittsburgh to South Carolina then eventually to Flor-

ida. My mother came over from Germany when she was in her mid-twenties.

## **While most members of the Natural Hygiene movement knew of your grandfather for his work as a Hygiene practitioner, I doubt that most knew of his love affair with the arts. Tell us about that.**

He was remarkably in tune with the arts, and especially enjoyed jazz piano. That was truly his passion, and had it not been for his path in healthy living, I think he would have ended up expressing himself through music for decades.

## **So I gather that he was very broad-minded and well-read in terms of art and literature.**

Remarkably so. He was a bibliophile as well as someone who loved music from just about every era. But most of all he was a lover of knowledge and, what you might say, a speaker of truth. He loved the philosophy of the arts and encouraged others in his life to cultivate this interest as well.

**In 1992 former NHA Executive Director Jim Lennon and I paid him a visit at the Ranch and did an interview with him in his living room. I vividly recall that he had a stunningly well-organized library of vintage books on health and just about everything else. Was he truly a book collector of some note?**

Yes, he collected thousands and thousands of books from all over the world, and it was a beautiful collection.

**He had, if I recall, one of the most extensive collections of work from the pioneers of ten Natural Hygiene Movements.**

Yes, as well as a host of first editions of all kinds of literature.

**Do you know what inspired him to go into healthcare?**

His father had some health issues and had found the benefits of natural hygiene, as it was laid out decades before. He valued it in his life and in so doing, strongly encouraged his son to pursue a career in the same tradition.

**So if you grew up in the Esser compound, I imagine you all ate at the same table and ate the same meals, right?**

We did. We ate pretty much the identical food that was served at the Ranch, which, of course, was largely a vegan program with the exception of occasional whole milk or whole-milk cheeses, and homemade ice cream on special holidays.

**From my many years in Natural Hygiene, I have often seen that it is sometimes very difficult for parents to get their children to follow the program, what with all the pressures and temptations in society. What are your thoughts about that?**

I think in the early years any young child wants to pursue things they are told they can't have or shouldn't have. However, as you get older you begin to recognize the intelligence of the decisions your parents or grandparents encouraged you to make. So there is no doubt, I think for each of us, there was a path of discovery. We knew how we felt eating that way, and that was powerful, as well as seeing the lives of many others change.

**So living virtually on the grounds of the Health Ranch, which was primarily a fasting institution for all those years, did your grandfather ever put you on a fast?**

Frequently! Fortunately, it was usually only when we indulged in excessive amounts of more processed foods, often in reaction to extra dairy that would be around during the holidays. But we all just fasted for a couple of days and were totally well, and that was it.

**Were you always intent on going to medical school?**

It was always something I was interested in. I wouldn't say

it was a predominant thought, but as a young lad I always enjoyed the sciences, nature, and helping people. So it was a natural fit.

**What is the reason you chose to attend medical school instead of chiropractic or naturopathic college where there might have been a more enlightened education?**

Well, I saw the challenges my grandfather dealt with from the allopathic approach, or the allopathic traditions, and I felt that I would like to know everything from their perspective that was most obviously in conflict with what I believed, and see whether there was continuity or whether it truly was a significant conflict.

**What was it like going through medical school learning a different viewpoint from the one you were raised with by your grandfather? Was that difficult to endure?**

For me, life continues to be about the journey, and so having a chance to impact people for good as I went through it all, whether it be my peers in medical school or eventually residents or the patients themselves, I always felt that it was an amazing blessing. But it wasn't particularly challenging to endure. The one challenge, of course, was re-gurgitating things that I did not wholeheartedly believe in.

**I noticed that on your website you encourage people to "seek health" rather than "gain health." What is the philosophy that underlies that?**

I think that not only is life a journey, but our health and the process of discovering health is also a journey. Some people are a little more advanced than others. Some people, unfortunately due to injury or genetic predisposition, never achieve what I might consider ideal health. But for each of us it also suggests that there is an opportunity there. So it's an encouragement to pursue our best health, whatever that can be.

**Do you think we should always strive to better our health through trying to get more rest, eating better, and eating in a more disciplined way?**

I do, and I think for the majority of us our foundation is still lacking, and I include myself in this group. I think we all need to continuously focus on how we deal with challenges and emotions, how we rest and sleep, how we choose the food we eat and the amount of exercise we get, and the water we consume. There is always room for improvement. I try to appreciate the achievements an individual has made. As I'm going through this period of my life, I also remain aware of the areas where I can make modifications to improve and sustain my own best health.

**On your website you talk about empowerment and optimism, and clearly you're a very optimistic guy. What is your concept of empowerment? Is it the basic Hygiene notion that "healthcare is selfcare"?**

I believe that the most powerful person in healthcare is the individual. And, as you suggested, healthcare equals selfcare for most of us, and as yet, many people fail to recognize the power of their personal choices. So empowerment really starts with what is grounded in education and awareness and just how powerful each of us is. The beauty of that is it allows individuals to recognize their own capacity and frees them, to some extent, from a feeling of dependence and depression.

**Tell me about the Esser Retreats?**

We've been pleased to offer retreats over the last couple of years, where individuals can experience a full immersion into healthy living that includes several hours of exercise per day, strict plant-based nutrition, psychologists working on emotional intelligence, and a host of other experiences. Our goal is to teach them the tools so they can live well when they leave the retreat.

**What are the retreat logistics?**

The retreats are held in a beautiful beach-front mansion in Ponte Verda Beach, Florida that we lease for each event. There are 8 to 15 people per event, and those that participate really experience the best of everything, including being on the beach, amazing food, and individual intervention.

**Do you and your wife Tiffany do all the lecturing?**

No, we have a cadre of teachers: a physician, nutritionists, psychologists, and other healthcare providers who come in and give lectures, as well as motivational speakers. The retreats last anywhere from four to seven days and there are about three to four hours of lectures per day. And of course, all of it is optional. The retreats are really about the individual's goals, and that is something that is unique.



*Esser Retreat participants can experience a full immersion into healthy living that includes daily exercise.*

We ask people about a month in advance what their goals are and what they want to learn about, and then we put together a group of speakers and presenters and other offerings toward achieving these goals.

**Are participants' meals provided for them as part of the package?**

Yes. We have been collaborating with a local private food preparation group called Fresh Jack. They make all pure SOS-free (salt-free, sugar-free, oil-free) and gluten-free foods that are absolutely stellar. And even with fantastic food that tastes so great, we continue to see anywhere from two to six pounds average weight loss per retreat. We also see the participants' blood sugars normalize and their insulin needs drop. Their blood pressures also improve during the stay.

**Does this mean you do some health monitoring while they're there?**

We do. We check a lot of basic levels prior to their visit and again at the end. We also encourage any individual to follow up with their private healthcare provider, both prior to and following the retreat, to continue a healthy living program, and to follow up on the appropriate laboratories.

**How often are the retreats?**

Right now they're offered every one to three months. All



*Esser Retreats are held in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, and include beach access, plant-based, SOS-free meals, and individual intervention.*

the information is available on our website:  
[www.esserhealth.com](http://www.esserhealth.com).

**Why is consuming food that is free of salt, oil and sugar so important?**

Especially for individuals who are trying to achieve significant disease reversal, the consumption of salt, oil and sugar really slows their detoxification. All three also stimulate the appetite, and so for the individual seeking sustainable weight loss, continued consumption will pose an obstacle. Of course, for the average Joe who has no major risk factors, no significant disease, and no major food addictions (which is the rare individual), perhaps a small amount of those products may not compromise their health. But for the majority of the patients we see who are seeking a deep cleanse to achieve better health and reduce or prevent disease, the elimination of salt, oil and sugar has been scientifically shown to be most powerful.

**You mention that your food is also gluten-free. Being gluten-free has become such a phenomenon, that every health food store and grocery store has entire gluten-free departments. How important do you believe it is to be gluten-free?**

I think the literature is still pending on how important it is universally. But I think there are likely individuals who have sensitivities to gluten, anywhere from just a little gastrointestinal sensitivity all the way to full-blown autoimmune disease. I also think there may be a great deal of it associated with the genetic modification of wheat and

other grains as we see them today. But I would argue that it is not necessarily a panacea for all people nor is it a universal cause of disease.

**Are you suggesting that since so much of our wheat and grain today is genetically modified that this may have as much to do with the health problems people are experiencing as the gluten factor itself?**

I think it's very possible. For all of it, however, we don't have good evidence with regard to long-term health outcomes of the consumption of genetically modified food. But I do believe that it's a mistake to think that we can modify food in a meaningful way and that this will not have long-term health effects.

**Staying on the subject of healthy food and healthy living, are you a proponent of organic foods and do you think that eating organic should be a high priority for people?**

For me, eating organic food is second in line for healthy living after eating a plant-based diet. I encourage patients who are seeking to improve their health but have really never made significant changes, to start with plant-based nutrition. I believe this is the most powerful nutritional decision an individual can make, especially as it relates to the number one killer in America: heart disease. Once an individual has adopted a plant-based program, converting to a wholly organic program is likely the next step and will have its own health benefits with regard to everything from autoimmune disease to neurologic conditions.

**One of the things I have always been impressed by and proud of in the Natural Hygiene Movement—and certainly the NHA, which has lead the movement for over 60 years—is that we’ve been advocates of the importance of organic farming, even long before most others and before there were national standards. Did your grandfather grow organically?**

He was 100% organic; and as you mentioned, long before “organic” was the trendy word as it is today. The American Natural Hygiene Society and its leaders really have lead the charge with regard to all these approaches to healthy living that are now seen as almost commonplace.

**Do you feel that your grandfather and his contemporaries, Drs. Shelton, Benesh, Gross, Anderson and more, were far ahead of their time?**

There is no doubt. They encouraged and advocated a rational approach to health that at the time was ludicrous to most conventional, allopathic medical providers, but today is seen as rational and relatively science-based. I think there is still a lot of discomfort and debate about the advocacy of fasting; however, even that is beginning to break down. And all of their great concepts that were seen as radical—the consumption of more fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and the avoidance of nicotine—are now seen as very straightforward.

**Do you believe that your grandfather and his peers were the real pioneers of the progressive plant-based diet movement that is enjoying such popularity today?**

I believe so. They adopted this and championed it at a time when it gave very little glamour. As some folks like to say, “We’ve come a long way baby!”

**Do you think that folks like your Grandfather just understood it intuitively? He and his peers certainly didn’t have the scientific studies at their disposal.**

I believe the movement was based heavily in the philosophy of life. One might even suggest something reflective of a natural law approach. They looked at the anatomy of the individual animal and made conclusions based upon the anatomic and physiologic adaptation. I think they wisely found it a very rational approach to say that the human frame that starts your anatomy and physiology is intended to, in large part, thrive on fruits and vegetables and little else, and that we also are adapted to have intermittent periods of caloric restriction for the improvement or reversal of health. By that I mean that congruence and health are universal.

**One of my favorite statements among the Hygiene pioneers was a statement by 19th Century physician, Dr. Russell Thacker**

**Trall, which I always thought best expressed what your grandfather, Dr. Shelton and his peers stood for:**

*“The system which we endorse and practice is true, in harmony with nature, and in accordance with the laws of the vital organism, correct in science, sound in philosophy, in agreement with common sense, successful in results and a blessing to mankind.”*

That is a rich epitaph there!

**You mentioned fasting is still probably a little bit on the outskirts of progressive thinking. From your vantage point being a medical doctor, what is the power of fasting?**

Complete physiologic rest is a rare opportunity for the body. Our bodies deliver all manner of anti-inflammatory hormones and restorative agents. While during that period of complete physiologic rest, such as fasting, the body is given an amazing opportunity to reset and recalculate and to restore normal balance. Science really shows powerful results, and we all know that fasting has been used in various healing and spiritual traditions for millennia. So fasting is something extremely powerful for the human body and mind, and I would argue, even the spirit.

**Are you optimistic that one day fasting will gain the respect and appreciation that plant-based nutrition has today?**

I do, and I think the excellent work that Dr. Goldhamer and his the team are doing at True North Health with regard to research, coupled with the work of others in various countries throughout the world, is moving in that direction. Hopefully, to the point, at least, where we’ve got a healthy dialogue in the scientific community about when fasting is appropriate rather than whether it is base or dangerous.

**What is the nature of your current medical practice? Do you see patients with general health problems?**

My current medical practice is split between contemporary sports medicine where I assist athletes of all ages and levels to achieve their best health through various more conventional approaches, and the lifestyle and healthy living work we do through our health retreats. It is our intention in the years ahead to open a free-standing health facility that will likely be my primary focus.

**And carry on the legacy of Esser’s Health Ranch?**

Currently that’s our goal; to powerfully impact people’s lives for good.

**Prior to your career in medicine, I read that you, like your dad and your grandfather, were pretty competitive tennis players. Is it true that you had reached number one ranking in the**

### country in men's doubles?

My cousin and I were ranked number one in the US in men's open doubles. We enjoyed playing, and I also taught full time for quite a few years.

### Do you still play tennis?

Tennis has always been a passion in our family, but I never get to play as much as I like!

### Did you ever play tennis with your grandfather?

All the time! He, of course, was my hitting partner as I grew up and well into my mid to late teens. He was still beating me when he was in his late seventies and early eighties.

### Did your father William also play tennis?

He did as well.

### And how competitive was he?

He was good. He and my grandfather had many long duals on the court.

### Tell me about your family. What does your wife Tiffany do?

Tiffany is very busy raising our daughter as well as coordinating our health retreats. She also trains individuals with fitness on the side, and she is an aspiring triathlete.

### Are you a triathlete or just a tennis player?

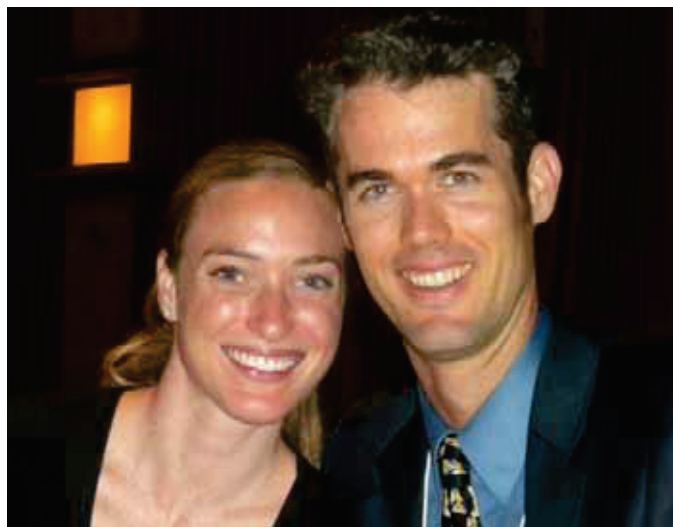
Right now, just a tennis player.

### You can't keep up with her; is that what you're telling me?

That's exactly what I'm telling you. She is a fireball!

### So tell me about your daughter.

We have a delightful 20-month-old daughter who is energetic and rambunctious and thriving on a hygienic ap-



*Tiffany and Stephan Esser*

proach to healthy living.

### So I guess I want to leave you with the \$64,000 question that everybody asks of everybody in hygiene leadership. Do you practice what you preach?

Absolutely. We consume a colorful, whole, unprocessed, plant-based diet. We've also essentially eliminated dairy out of our diet, which is obviously a little different than some of the traditional hygienic converts. We did that several years back and we love the way we feel, and I think that is probably the most powerful reason why we do it. In addition, of course, to all the other powerful and positive effects on our community and the planet at large.

### Thanks for taking the time to talk to us, doc. This has been a great interview.

It is always my pleasure. Thanks for everything you do.



**Esser Health**  
Power To Live Well

**For more information visit:  
[www.esserhealth.com](http://www.esserhealth.com)**

