

## Going Cold Turkey without the Turkey

*Karen and George Heitman watched Forks Over Knives and knew immediately what they wanted to do.*

*by J. Lanning Smith*

**T**wo NHA members, Karen and George Heitman, are fond of telling people that when it came to going whole food, plant-based, “We went cold turkey without the turkey.”

It took just one watching of the documentary *Forks Over Knives* for them to come to the conclusion that plant-based eating was the right path for them to take. It was the science, as it was laid out in the film, that convinced Karen and George to give up all meat and dairy products and immediately begin eating whole, plant-based foods. That was over six years ago, at the end of 2012, and neither of them has looked back since.

One reason Karen and George have never looked back is because of the health benefits they’ve seen. Both quickly found out they no longer needed prescription medications. And while neither one was very overweight, they both lost weight by adopting a plant-based lifestyle.

### Active and Health-Minded

Karen and George were always very health-minded and they actively promoted healthy lifestyles. Karen was an early president of the Bicycle Club in Sun City Hilton Head, where she worked with the town of Bluffton and



*Karen and George in 1998 on their tandem bicycle trip from Atlanta, Georgia to Richmond, Virginia.*



*Karen and George Heitman in 2016*

Beaufort County to build off-road, multi-use pathways for resident usage along major roads in southern Beaufort County. George is the current president of the Sun City Cyclers, and he takes several long-distance bicycle trips a year that involve travel all around the world.

In addition to bicycling, Karen does yoga three times a week at one of Sun City’s amenity centers. And both enjoy walking on Sun City’s close to milelong nature trail. To add endurance to her walking the nature trail, Karen has been known to wear a weighted vest. Walking gives her an opportunity to not only get physical exercise, but also good mental stimulation from talking with fellow walkers on the trail.

### Starting the ESLL Club

In May 2013, along with her two sisters (Mary Lou Beavers and Leslie Haas), Karen started the Eat Smart Live Longer Club in Sun City. Karen became the club’s president and served in that capacity for over two and a half years. Sun City rules prohibited her from running for a consecutive term, but after sitting out 2016, she took over the reins as club president again in 2017. Under Karen’s leadership, the ESLL club grew from an initial membership of approximately 60 residents to over 500.

Karen has always taken her leadership of the club seriously. Concerned that she not lead the club in the wrong

direction, she enrolled in the T. Colin Campbell Center for Nutrition Studies at Cornell University, where she earned her Certificate in Plant-Based Nutrition. Then she and George signed up for the Holistic Holiday at Sea cruise, out of Miami, in the Spring of 2013. There, she and George listened to lectures and met some of the top doctors in the field of eating whole food, plant-based. They continued to learn by going on the cruise for the next three years in a row.

Armed with the knowledge from Cornell and from the vegan cruise, Karen had the confidence to start and run the Eat Smart Live Longer Club. Her first action was to show the film *Forks Over Knives* to that initial set of 60 people who showed up for the first organizational meeting. Ever since, *Forks Over Knives* became a predominant recruiting tool for the club. Karen bought several copies of the film with her own money and began loaning it out to people who were not familiar with the whole food, plant-based way of eating. By doing so, she convinced more and more people to change their dietary habits.

### Finding the NHA

Over Thanksgiving in 2016, Mark Huberman, president of the National Health Association, and his wife Wanda, vacationed in Hilton Head, South Carolina. During that time, they visited Pure Natural Market, a plant-based eatery on Hilton Head Island, owned and operated by Tracie Owens and Brinsley Nelson. While eating at Pure one day, Tracie told Mark and Wanda about the Eat Smart Live Longer Club in Sun City, and suggested that Mark and Wanda meet the three sisters who founded the club.

Soon, Mark and Wanda were having dinner with the three sisters and their spouses and learning about the Eat Smart Live Longer Club. Karen became devoted to the National Health Association immediately, as did her sisters. She joined the NHA and actively began promoting it within ESLL. This was all the more remarkable because Karen has always maintained extremely high standards for what she is willing to promote. Most organizations and businesses don't make the cut. But she was thoroughly impressed with Mark and Wanda and with the organization that they were leading. Karen wanted ESLL to be a



*In May of 2013, Karen Heitman co-founded the Eat Smart, Live Longer club in Sun City Hilton Head (Bluffton, South Carolina).*

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part of the NHA from the very beginning.

Karen and George have attended the NHA conferences each June in Cleveland, Ohio. Like the cruise, it was another opportunity for them to hear top-notch doctors speak on eating whole food, plant-based. Karen never tires of hearing these talks, and she says they give her inspiration to keep going.

Since joining the NHA and starting to attend the conferences, Karen has accepted a position on the NHA's board of directors. She continues to work tirelessly to promote the mission of the NHA and to promote the mission of ESLL.

### Active Promotion of WFPB

Even when Karen's not acting in an official capacity, either with NHA or with ESLL, she is often working behind the scenes to help others adopt the whole food, plant-based lifestyle. She will answer people's questions, and she continues to write to the local newspapers and other publications to promote a plant-based lifestyle. George is supporting the East Coast Greenway, as well as facilitating bicycle touring with bike club members.

Karen is also organizing and leading ESLL's 21-Day Weightloss Kickstart Program. Through that program, Karen continues to guide and help others to a better and healthier lifestyle. Having lost her own mother to breast cancer and seeing her dad suffer from diabetes a large part of his life, Karen understands the importance of a healthy diet. It's why she encourages everyone to go "cold turkey without the turkey." 



**J. Lanning Smith**, an active member of the National Health Association, is a whole food, plant-based writer and current Vice-President of the Eat Smart Live Longer Club in Sun City Hilton Head. He has himself lost 150

pounds and gotten off of all prescription medications through following a whole food, plant-based lifestyle. His blog can be found at [TheArtofPlant-BasedMealCreation.com](http://TheArtofPlant-BasedMealCreation.com), and he writes for Health Science magazine on a regular basis.