

# Taking Charge of His Health Leads to Growing Outreach

CHANGING LIVES USING THE PLANTPURE NATION MODEL

by Doug Schmidt

At age 49, no one expects to have a heart attack. Shock, fear, and so many other feelings went through me. Now, 13 years later, I can say it was a blessing—a blessing for me, my family, and those that heard my story.

**On Memorial Day in 2008, I had a widowmaker heart attack.** A blockage in my lower anterior descending artery sent me into emergency surgery, from which I came out with a new piece of hardware called a stent. Having become a new cardiac patient, I wanted to know what I was in for. I read that if I changed none of my lifestyle habits, I would most likely be back on the surgery table within five years. The prognosis was not positive. I would have to live with prescription medicines (that wouldn't heal my heart) for the rest of my life. The medications would just treat the underlying symptoms until my body wore out.

Fear is a powerful motivator. I didn't want my chest cut open, so I looked for alternatives and found this book by a cardiologist named Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, Jr.

He said all I had to do was to give up my meat, cheese, and other animal products and eat vegetables and I wouldn't have to worry about another heart attack. I thought that was a bit extreme, so I looked to the

American Heart Association. I thought that, surely, they must know what they are talking about. At the time of my heart attack, their recommendations were to limit red meat and stick to lean cuts of other meats like poultry and fish. And I could have four eggs a week.

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We had moved to a small eight-acre farm where we raised our own chickens. I had two of their eggs on Sundays, and I dropped all red meat. But almost a year to the day of my heart attack, I was back in the emergency room. This time it was just a scare. They said I'd had a blockage that passed that didn't need a stent, but they would keep an eye on things.

If the AHA advice didn't work, I thought, maybe I should look at that doctor's book



again. So, after reading Dr. Esselstyn's *Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease* and with the help of my wife, Shari, we revamped our eating habits. It wasn't overnight, but gradually we made the changes. Then we found out I was statin-sensitive, so my doctor tried three different statins—each one with side effects worse than the last. The last one almost crippled me, causing generalized muscle weakness that made me have to walk with a hiking pole and pull myself up stairs. My doctor said we could try another statin or we could do it all with diet.

That is when things really changed. It was all up to me and what I put in my mouth. By making the change to a whole-food, plant-based diet, I was able to get off of all my medications and lose 60 pounds. They were major changes, for sure, but what happened next, I would never have expected.

During my time as a teacher in a New York school district, an adjunct position opened up for a wellness coordinator for our district. Our district is in a consortium for health care

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with 35 other schools. The coordinators have a small fund to draw on for wellness incentives. That year was 2015, and Shari and I had just watched the movie *PlantPure Nation*. We wanted to emulate the 10-day challenge they had in the movie, so we created a 10-day plant-based challenge with 31 participants. They all received PlantPure meals and a copy of the *PlantPure Nation Cookbook*. That year we saw the same kind of results they showed in the movie. Our before-and-after biometrics revealed that participants on average lost 3–10 pounds and saw drops of 30–50 points in total cholesterol.

The next year, we wanted to see if we could help more people make the change. We couldn't afford meals for more participants, so they just received the cookbook along with daily newsletters to help guide their way. We had 63 participants, with similar results as the year before. It was such a success that in 2017 the head of the consortium asked if we could do it for all

the schools in the consortium, so we offered the challenge to 35 school districts and one community college. We were overwhelmed with 1,300 participants!

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In addition to the annual challenge, we have also trained over 30 plant-based coaches for many of the districts. These individuals act as resident experts and help promote plant-based nutrition within their districts throughout the year. In some districts, the school cafeterias have even jumped on board, creating plant-based meals for the participants. Some of the food service operations even continue those offerings outside of the annual challenge.

We continue to offer our program each January, and our participant numbers

continue to increase. We typically now have over 3,000 participants, and the last two years we have written our own cookbooks for the challenges with over 60 recipes in each.

What began as a path to regain my health ended up with our being able to help so many more make changes in their lives. Plants are the most powerful medicine—with only positive side effects! I wish everyone was aware of that power.

What brought me to the National Health Association was a friend who was raving about the recent national conference. After looking into the resources, the articles, and the featured doctors, I wondered, how did I not know about this amazing organization? I am hoping that I can contribute in some way to the NHA and share its amazing resources with the network schools and businesses I work with. We all need to be plant-based evangelists to carry forward the message that to be healthy you have to eat healthy. 🌱